

## Homily: The Assumption of Our Lady 2021

For today's feast the Church gives us the Gospel of the Visitation, when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth after hearing the news that she is to bear the Son of God. At first glance, it may seem a long way from what we celebrate: this event takes place at the start of the Gospel, when Mary is still a young woman, whereas today we celebrate her being taken up into heaven at the end of her earthly life. But in a beautiful way, this simple scene points us to the mystery we celebrate today. Mary has journeyed up into the hills – she has ascended, just as today she is taken up into heaven. She enters the house of Zechariah, just as today she enters the House of God which is heaven. And the whole scene is filled with joy. We heard in today's Gospel Acclamation: "Mary has been taken up into heaven; all the choirs of angels are rejoicing". We can imagine this wonderful scene: heaven rejoices as it welcomes its Queen, the mother of the Son of God.

Today's first reading also presents us with an image from heaven. "The sanctuary of God in heaven opened, and the ark of the covenant could be seen inside it." The ark contained, in some way, the presence of God for the people of ancient Israel, and so it points us to Mary, who carried the presence of God in her womb. Now the ark – Mary – is seen in heaven. And the reading goes on: "Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, clothed with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown." It's an image represented in the statue of Our Lady in our church today: we see the crown of stars, and if you were close enough, you would be able to see the moon beneath her feet. It seems obvious to us that the woman in the reading is Mary – not just because she is in heaven, but also because she gives birth to "the One who will rule all the nations" – Jesus. But most Scripture experts would tell you that this woman is actually a symbol of the Church. It is the Church which brings Jesus to birth anew in every age, and the Church who is persecuted and protected by God, just like the woman in the reading.

So we can ask ourselves: is this woman Mary, or the Church? The answer, simply, is that she is both. Mary, in fact, is an embodiment of the Church. She always represents the Church, the followers of Jesus. At Nazareth, she said 'yes' to welcoming the Saviour not just into her womb, but into our world: she stood to represent us all, the whole human race. Standing at the foot of the cross, Mary represents the Church in its suffering, and all the followers of Jesus who stand with the Lord and suffer with Him. At Pentecost, Mary was present, representing the Church of every age being animated by the Holy Spirit. And today, Mary represents the Church – in other words, us – being taken up into heaven, body and soul. She is a sign that we will be redeemed – not just our souls, but our bodies too: there is no part of you or me that will not be saved by God.

That's really what St Paul teaches in today's second reading. He tells us that all people will be brought to life in Christ, to share in His resurrection in heaven, but all of us "in our proper order": Christ first, then those who follow Him. As Mary was the first and greatest follower of her Son, it is right that she is the first to be taken up into heaven to share most fully in His glory. And because she represents the whole Church, she shows us what our

future will be too. She is a sign of hope that promises us future glory. That is the meaning of today's feast.

Let's return to the scene in today's Gospel. Mary is welcomed into the house by her own family, her kin. Elizabeth, who is pregnant, gives a cry of joy; her unborn child, John the Baptist, leaps for joy in the womb. And the unborn Jesus, we can imagine, also rejoiced in this moment. When Mary was received into heaven, Jesus was already there, awaiting her, filled with joy at her coming; and now we can add the angels who rejoice too, and the Father, and the Holy Spirit. Imagining this scene also gives us a sign of hope for our future: one day, we will be taken up, body and soul, into heavenly glory. We will be welcomed by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; by Mary, by the rejoicing angels and saints. And, just as Mary was welcomed into the house by her family, we can also look forward to being welcomed into eternal happiness by our loved ones, who will rejoice to see us again. Today's feast is filled with light and hope for our future: a hope that invites us not to be complacent, but instead to work with all our hearts to climb to the heights as we make our journey through this life. It shows us our destination, and invites us to keep on walking that path of love, the path of faithfulness to God. Mary endured great times of suffering and uncertainty in her life, but she always followed the will of God and lived a life full of grace and love. She shows us that this is the path which leads to eternal glory and joy. Let us see in her an encouragement, for ourselves and for the whole Church: a sign which spurs us onwards as we draw closer to Jesus, and to the Father's house.

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