

Lectionary Readings for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 61:10-end

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Luke 1:46-55

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.'

He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

*****Hannah’s Prayer—I Samuel 2: 1-10**

Hannah prayed and said,
‘My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.

‘There is no Holy One like the Lord,
no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.

The Lord kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

The Lord makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.

He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honour.
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s,
and on them he has set the world.

‘He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;
he will give strength to his king,
and exalt the power of his anointed.’

Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Trinity

I love to go to St. Paul's Cathedral once or twice a month to be one of the duty chaplains there—to celebrate the eucharist, say the prayers on the hour, to be available to anyone who wants to talk. Here is a conversation I have almost every time I go: *Is this a Catholic Church? No, this is a Church of England Church. Ah—what's the difference?* I then give my best three-minute summary of the Protestant Reformation. I carefully emphasise what we share: the liturgy is very similar, I say—it is the source of authority that causes us to differ, and certain doctrines such as papal infallibility, and the immaculate conception and assumption of Mary. *So you don't believe in Mary? No, please, let me clarify:* I then spend another ten or fifteen minutes talking about this figure, of Mary....I try to be clear, and helpful. It is a challenge!

If I were asked for a title for this sermon, it would be *Why I do not pray to Mary*. Let me explain. I grew up as a Southern Baptist in Texas, born into a church-going family for whom, as for all Baptists, the sermon was the principal feature of every service (and these were very long!) When I was 13, we moved to another town in Texas—Tyler—and my father, who longed for more substantial, scholarly sermons, found First Presbyterian Church, where the sermons were brilliant, and somewhat shorter. So I became a Presbyterian along with the rest of my family, and continued to revere the written words of Scripture as expounded, Sunday by Sunday. I was ordained as a Presbyterian in 1984, a very long time ago, and though I am now Anglican, those two early affiliations have shaped me and formed me. I still love these words of sacred Scripture upon which all the branches of the Church base their worship. They are, indeed, the very foundation of our faith.

So, to the figure of Mary. Today is the closest Sunday to August 15th, the day on which the Assumption of Mary is celebrated in a long list of countries. I lived in Rome for eight and a half years: this was the day when everything stopped, everything closed, and everyone went on vacation at the same time.

The Assumption of Mary, or the taking up of Mary into heaven, is one of the four Marian dogmas of the Roman Catholic Church. Pope Pius XII defined it in 1950 in his apostolic constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* as follows:

We proclaim and define it to be a dogma revealed by God that the immaculate Mother of God, Mary ever virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven.

This declaration was built upon the 1854 dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary, which declared that Mary was conceived as free from original sin.

Not that Jesus was born without sin, mind you, but Mary, his mother. This declaration followed centuries of theological debate, but is nowhere found in the Gospels, or anywhere else in Scripture. There was long debate as to whether Mary rose from the dead after a brief period (her dormition) and then ascended into heaven or whether she was assumed bodily into heaven before she died. Ah, well.

So where did this exaltation of the figure of Mary begin? We have to go back to the Old Testament. Isaiah 7:14 is a verse in which the prophet Isaiah, addressing king Ahaz of Judah in the eighth century B. C., promises that God will destroy the king's enemies before a child born to an *almah* is weaned. Scholars agree that the word *almah* has nothing to do with virginity, but in the 2nd century B.C., the Greek Septuagint translated it as *parthenos*, meaning *virgin*, thereby allowing Matthew to use the verse as a prophetic prediction of the virgin birth of Jesus.

Almah derives from a root meaning *to be full of vigour, to have reached puberty*. Scholars agree that *almah* refers to a woman of childbearing age—it does not imply virginity.

An even later development of this doctrine—that Mary remained a virgin after the birth of Jesus—went hand in hand with the glorification of virginity during and after the second century, when the ascetic strand of Christianity was forming.

The Middle Ages saw the widespread development of Mariology. Belief in the Assumption of Mary became widespread across the Christian world from the 6th century onward. The majority of Western Marian writers during this period belonged to the monastic tradition, particularly the Benedictines. The twelfth and thirteenth centuries saw an extraordinary growth of the cult of the Virgin in western Europe, in part inspired by the writings of theologians such as Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153), one of the most influential churchmen of his time. Gradually the idea that Mary had been cleansed of original sin at the very moment of her conception began to predominate.

By the end of the Middle Ages, Marian feasts were firmly established in the calendar of the liturgical year. With the Protestant Reformation, Roman Catholic Mariology came under attack as being sacrilegious and superstitious. Martin Luther and John Calvin considered Catholic veneration of Mary as competing with the divine role of Christ. The culmination of all these theological developments occurred in 1854, when Pope Pius IX proclaimed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Pope John Paul II made Marian devotions a hallmark of his papacy; in this he had an enormous impact on the daily practice of the average worshipper in the Roman Catholic Church.

But our Scripture reading this morning is not Mary's biography, but her song, now known by its Latin name, *The Magnificat*, from the first words of the song, "My soul magnifies..." It is one of the most beautiful psalms of praise to God in the entire Bible. We recite these words at every evensong, every day of the year. They are embedded in our hearts.

Did Mary herself compose the Magnificat? No credible biblical scholar today would say *yes*. In the Old Testament there was already a tradition of placing words on the lips of well-known figures in order to have them voice appropriate sentiments of praise at a particular manifestation of God's goodness. In particular, Hannah's song in I Samuel 2: 1-10 is echoed in *The Magnificat*: Hannah there offers praise to God in thanks for His gift of a child to her, a barren woman. If you read this song of Hannah, however, the warlike character of the last lines makes scholars judge that a more general psalm from elsewhere in the Old Testament has been taken over for a new purpose. This does not lessen the beauty of the words.

Luke did not compose *The Magnificat* himself, but drew from a rich store of Jewish-Christian hymns. Luke placed this canticle on Mary's lips because the theology it expressed was the same as his own, and the same as his understanding of the kind of person Mary was.

The great theme these lines announce is *the theme of reversal*. This theme becomes the theme of Luke's entire Gospel. *He has shown strength with His arm; He has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their hearts; he has put down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted those of low degree.*

The past tenses of these lines suggest that this hymn originally dealt with salvation in retrospect (after the resurrection) rather than with its inauguration. These lines are not really the appropriate sentiments of a maiden who has not yet given birth to the Messiah; they are much more appropriate if composed by those who know that through the resurrection God has reversed the crucifixion.

The Catholic Church teaches that Mary is the Mother of God, that she is to be venerated as the Mother of God, and that she intercedes for us to secure our salvation. Anglicans believe that Mary gave birth to Christ in a way that is full of mystery, the mystery of the Holy Spirit. We do not need Mary to intercede for us; we pray directly to the Christ who has redeemed us from all that has bound us and has freed us to walk as children of light. And to the God who is above all, revealed to us in the sacred words of Scripture.

I love the Magnificat—it is the revolutionary centrepiece of the Christian faith—it is what we live by. We pray for those who are most vulnerable in our world to be raised up; we work for justice to be done. We believe in the God we read about in Scripture who cares about the least and the lowly. God wills the reversal of the evil that human beings inflict upon one another; God wills that the proud and arrogant come to know that their very lifeblood comes from God—that they are inextricably bound up with all of God’s good creation. It is a holy theme, this theme of reversal. May we participate actively in the reversal of so much that is wrong in our world!

And, like Mary, may we be open to whatever it is God is calling us to do,
now and always,
Amen!

Mary in the New Testament, edited by Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and John Reumann, Fortress Press, 1978.

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