

Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary (transferred)
Sunday, August 16, 2020

First Sunday of The Rev. Benjamin Pearce Straley
as the 19th Rector of Saint Stephen's Church in Providence, Rhode Island

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord...’”

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, it is good to be here.

It is a wonderful and joyful thing to be here, finally, in the midst of all of you,
the good people of St. Stephen's Church, in Providence.

I have awaited this day with excitement for some time now,
and I gather you have too –

and yet I must acknowledge that it is perhaps not quite what we expected it to be.

You'll have noticed by now that I have not removed my mask during the liturgy,
and whereas previously Fr. Locke and others have been able to celebrate and preach
without putting on a mask until Communion,

this past week, our Bishop changed the guidelines set forth
for churches who have resumed in person worship.

For the time being, all those leading worship are to wear masks at all times;
so I am sorry for the frustration that naturally brings,

and I hope that you are able to understand me clearly this morning
as I speak through this mask.

But no mask can dim my excitement and my joy for this day.

This day – yes, because it is my first Sunday among you and with you,
but of course, as you know by now,

because we are also celebrating the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary,
transferred from yesterday, the 15th of August.

I am reminded of the Saturday that I first met with your Vestry,
and Molly Ellis asked me “What is one of your favorite Anglo Catholic traditions?”
or something to that effect.

I immediately panicked – it is a bit like being asked what a favorite song or food is,
or if you have a favorite child: it’s an impossible question to really answer;
but I found myself blurting out, “August 15th – the feast of the Assumption.”

Now it’s not a specifically Anglo-Catholic tradition –

it’s a major feast day in the Roman Church,

and even a holiday in many European and Latin American countries.

But as Anglicans or Episcopalians,

the truth is,

it is a day on the calendar when we Anglo-Catholics stick out from the crowd.

In typical Anglican fashion,
the Prayer Book and the Collect for the Day are more notable for what they
DO NOT say, rather than what they do say.

August 15th is simply the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin,
and the collect simply speaks of God taking Mary unto himself,
which, as a colleague pointed out yesterday,
is a very economical and unfussy way of letting folks
choose their own Marian adventure.

There is no mention of the Roman doctrine of the Assumption,
and you'll find no mention of that term or that dogma anywhere in the Prayer Book.
The Roman Church states that Mary was taken up into the presence of God,
soul and body at the moment of her death.

She did not see corruption;
and this was granted to her as a gift from the Father
for her unique role in salvation history.

The one who bore God in the world is taken by God into heaven
as a sign of his favor and grace.

The truth is, none of us can really know what happened to the Virgin Mary
when she experienced the death that all humans must experience.

We're probably better off attributing it to the realm of mystery,
which our Orthodox brothers and sisters are quite content to do
with many theological matters.

However, we are inheritors of the western Christian tradition,
and the tradition of the Assumption of Mary permeates Western art
and western Christianity.

It is, essentially, *adiaphora* – a Greek term, meaning something indifferent –
something that is not an essential article of faith for our salvation.

And so, as I said a moment ago,
while we could argue that most of what we do as Anglo-Catholic Episcopalians
is not so different from what everyone else in the Episcopal church does,
today is a day we do indeed stick out from the rest of the crowd.

And it is a good and wonderful thing.

We need not have any hang ups about it either –
for our celebration of the Assumption is grounded in that classic
threefold source of authority in Anglicanism: Scripture, Tradition, and Reason.

We venerate Mary because we know from Scripture
that she is the Mother of Our Lord – Jesus the Redeemer of the World:
Jesus, the Author of Salvation, who was present since the foundation of the World.

She is the one whom, in Luke's Gospel, the angel Gabriel hails as "Full of Grace."

The Revelation to St. John speaks of a woman clothed with the Sun,
with the moon under her feet, and around her head a crown of twelve stars.

The earliest traditions of the Church interpreted this as Mary,
and within two or three hundred years of Jesus's death and resurrection,
special devotion to Mary and her title of God-bearer were both well established.

As I remarked to Fr. Pearson the other day,
any high Mariology is really just a reflection or natural consequence
of a high Christology –

meaning that if our view of Jesus as God Incarnate –
the second person of the Trinity –

is strong and robust,
then as we apply reason to the relationship of Mary to Jesus,
both as his mother and her role in the salvation that he brings,
it is only natural or reasonable that we begin to afford her extra devotion,
and an exalted place among the created order.

She is the New Eve, the mother of a new humanity redeemed in Christ;
she is higher than the cherubim, more glorious than the seraphim,
leading their praises as bearer of the eternal Word.

As bearer and container of the eternal Word of God that it is Jesus,
she is the New Ark of the New Covenant;
she is the Cause of our Joy, the Refuge of Sinners,
the Star of the Sea,
pointing us toward her Son among the stormy seas of this life's journey.

The calendar year that is 2020
has been one of the more stormy seasons of our common life;
the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted nearly every aspect of our lives.

As the Church, or the Body of Christ,
we have felt that most acutely in our inability to worship together for a time;
and even now, though we are able to gather in person,
it is with caution and care,
and without the ability to see and experience one another and our liturgy
in the ways in which we would prefer.

And so as we navigate our way through these uncharted waters,
let us commend ourselves to our blessed Mother's protection,
and ask her to pray for us to her Son in these times.

But even more importantly,
let us remember to yet give thanks.

I hope you noticed that all of our readings this morning are characterized by joy – the kind of joy that can scarcely be contained.

We hear the prophet Isaiah exclaim, “I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God;”

while the psalmist sings, “I will bless the Lord at all times; *

his praise shall ever be in my mouth.”

These are a steady build up to the song of the Blessed Virgin herself, as she cries out the song of praise that has echoed down the church for two thousand years now:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

My soul MAGNIFIES the Lord –
not just praises, or lauds, or gives thanks to:
not exult, or give honor, or rejoice ...
but MAGNIFIES.

It is the kind of joy and ecstatic euphoria
that cannot really be captured in words alone.

In the Magnificat, or the song of the Blessed Virgin,
we see her rejoice in the fullness of God’s promise,

and in her rejoicing,

she sees a world around her full of the promises of God,

waiting to be made a reality.

So my prayer for us this day is that we may likewise

be able to look at the world around us –

to look at it afresh, and see it brimming with promises of God's reign,

of new and resurrected life,

of possibilities and great expectation.

That is my prayer for us this day, for the year to come,

and for this new chapter in the story of St. Stephen's parish.

Let us proclaim our faith boldly, and celebrate our liturgies with zeal,

and, as I said earlier, really "stick out" among the rest of the crowd –

and not just among our other sister parishes in this city,

but in this neighborhood.

May we be a beacon of refreshment, warmth, splendor, and life

in this neighborhood and this campus community.

Like Mary, may we bear Christ to the world – too all those we encounter,

and to all those who come through these doors.

Like Mary,

may we behold Jesus on the Cross – and know that God is present
in all our trials and all our suffering.

However, it is the endurance of those pains
which make the final reward so bright in its promise.

And so on this day when we remember Mary's assumption into heaven –
the completion of her time on earth;

we rejoice that she, who foretold and proclaimed
all the wonderful things that God would accomplish in her Son,
finally experienced the joy of that salvation herself,
and was welcomed into her eternal Home –

she, who was paradoxically the home of God for a time.

We rejoice this day because Mary's reward
is likewise our hope and the vision to which we attain –
Mary has gone to the place which is prepared for all of us,
and in the promises which are to her fulfilled,
we see a pledge of our own inheritance.

This time next year,
we'll celebrate the Assumption with singing and rejoicing,
with hymns and all sorts of splendor:

“Hail Holy Queen, enthroned above!”

“Sing of Mary, pure and lowly”

“Ye own the faith of Jesus, sing the wonders that were done”

Who knows? We may be so thrilled to be back to our normal ways of worship
that we may get a brass band and process our Lady Statue around the neighborhood!

But for now, we must be content to let Mary sing the song

that we cannot physically sing right now;

we will have to let the praises of Mary herself

echo within our souls and our hearts –

praise and rejoicing that no masks, no physical distancing,

and no pandemic can diminish or take away.

May our own souls magnify the Lord in their own quiet way,

rejoicing in the promises of God, and of the great things he hath done.

May we find comfort knowing that even now,

Our Lady is praising God, lost in wonder, love, and praise:

“Praise, O Mary, praise the Father,
 praise thy Savior and thy Son,
praise the everlasting Spirit,
 who hath made thee ark and throne;
o'er all creatures high exalted,
 lowly praise the Three in One.
Hail, Mary, full of grace.”

✠ Amen.