

The Assumption of Our Lady: Heavenly hope for earth-bound people!
First Reading: Apocalypse 11 (various v's): The woman, child & dragon;
Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:2-26: Christ's humanity saved us;
Gospel: Luke 1:39-56: Mary's visitation; her hymn of praise to God.

Confession time: I have had difficulties all my life with the Book of Apocalypse (meaning 'Revelation'). I know that the author's style is highly symbolic, but the idea of monsters (whether sent by God or the devil) doing weird things - like wiping out chunks of humanity - has never appealed to me. (The same goes for Tolkien & Harry Potter!) But seriously, I have had to think carefully about this Sunday's first reading. The writer mentions a "woman adorned with the sun", who was about to give birth to a boy, and was threatened by "a huge red dragon", which wanted to eat her child as soon as it was born.

This is not just my feeling: Apocalypse had a very chequered history in the early church. While the writer called himself John, there is no proof that he was the same 'John' who wrote the gospel. However, some of his ideas are the same: for example, only Apocalypse & John's gospel call Jesus "The Lamb of God" – a phrase we take as normal, especially in the Mass prayers. On the other hand, many Eastern Christians refused to accept the book as 'inspired' – they felt that its language was too strange to be part of God's Word to us. (This was despite the fact that two well-known Old Testament books – Daniel and Ezekiel – use similar, highly-symbolic language.)

All this matters for this Sunday's feast, because you might think that, by his vision of the woman, baby & dragon, the writer was referring to our Lady giving birth to Jesus. He wasn't. The woman represented Israel as the mother of the Messiah; by extension, she also represented the Christian Church, the 'new Israel', in its fight with the force of evil – the 'dragon'. It was later Christians who 'read back' a reference to our Lady into this vision. I am not saying that this was wrong, but it most probably would not have been what the author originally had in mind. Popular devotion to Mary did not start until long after the New Testament had been completed.

But popular devotion did come in. Studying Bible texts - such as the first two chapters of both Matthew & Luke (eg, this Sunday's gospel) & the other references to Mary - people gradually began to appreciate her great role in Christian salvation. St Paul, in the 2nd reading, mentions the way Christ's humanity, which was crucified, then raised, undid the damage done by human sin ever since our first parents. He writes that the final "enemy" – meaning sin's

awful effect on us as people – to be destroyed by Christ was death itself. From this, Christians began to appreciate the work of Christ's earthly mother: she had given him life, reared and educated him, and was with him at his death - the moment of redemption from sin. She also rejoiced that he was alive after the resurrection. As years went by, people appreciated more & more just how close the Son and Mother must have been in this process of Christian redemption.

Catholic and Orthodox Christians have always accepted that God reveals himself to us through Christ his Son, who is present in the Bible and in the life of the Church, as both Bible & Church are inspired by the Holy Spirit. This is why we can accept, as true, those ideas that develop during the history of the Church, and are said to be reliable by the Church's highest authority. This was the case with our Lady's Assumption. While not mentioned in Scripture (and therefore rejected out-of-hand by most Reformers in the 1500's), it was a belief that had grown steadily in the consciousness of Christians, starting in the Eastern Churches. By the early middle ages, it was held almost universally, and it's surprising that it only became an essential part of RC doctrine as late as 1950. In that year, Pope Pius XII declared: "We proclaim and define it to be a dogma revealed by God that...Mary ever-Virgin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up, body and soul, into the glory of Heaven."

I'd like to finish with three comments. First, Pope Pius XII appealed to the continuity of belief over the centuries that Mary had shared with her Son (though in a lesser capacity) the work of our redemption - as St Paul mentions in the 2nd reading. She had borne and educated Jesus, then accompanied him during much of his public life. It was felt that her dedication (and freedom from sin) had "earned" her a full share in his risen life, which is what the Assumption means. Second, the Pope does NOT say that she avoided old-age, sickness and even death; he only says, "When the course of her earthly life was finished". What happened exactly on her death-bed, we'll never know, but she was given by God immediately that for which we hope: eternal, risen life with Christ. Third, I think we need occasional reminders that there is more to human existence than merely this life – especially just now, with the cost-of-living nightmare hitting us hard. Despite how pretty her statues in places like Fatima, Lourdes and Medjugorge may appear, she must have had a hard life, with some bitter moments. You and I may often fall short in our dedication to Jesus, but Mary shows what God's grace can achieve in us – if we let it. *Fr Jim Dunne.*

