

The Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 2004
Rev. 11. 19-12. 6, 10; Luke 1. 46-55
SS. Mary and Nicholas, Littlemore

'A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet; and on her head a crown of twelve stars' (Rev. 12. 1)

To enter the book of Revelation, and to feel its power, is rather like the most vivid sort of nightmare that one has with a fever, or the urgent sense of intensity and decision one faces at moments of extreme personal crisis or breakdown. I am sucked between the devil and the deep blue sea; I am about to be swallowed by a monster. You might think that such dramas are the stuff of madness, and best left out of polite English religion. But if so, you had better not align yourself with a church dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin; for here today, on the feast of her Assumption (her reception, on death, into heaven) we are forced to consider her significance, not merely as the ordinary young woman, the historical Mary, who marvellously agreed to become God's mother, but as a symbolic figure of *cosmic* significance in the battle of good and evil. And if you think the idea of the ongoing battle between *good and evil* is mad, then you certainly cannot enter the world of the book of Revelation, and nor indeed – in my view – can you crack the heart of the gospel message. So a lot hangs on this bizarre vision from Revelation 12, especially today, our patronal feast-day. How can we possibly make sense of it?

Let us admit it at the outset: the passage we have heard from the book of Revelation is notoriously difficult to interpret. It is operating with the grandiose language of archetypes and symbols; it is more like the world of Star-wars or Lord of the Rings than that of the newspaper. And that is why it – and the strange female figure - can be interpreted in more than one way, and probably always have been; because the symbolic realm can allow several layers of meaning to attach to it – therein lies much of its power. So here a mysterious Woman is found in heaven, crowned with stars, with the sun above her and the moon beneath her; she is groaning in labour. And a vicious dragon menacingly waits to devour the child, the Messiah, as soon as he appears: 'life and death contending'. To a Jewish Christian reading the apocalypse of John in the late first century, a heavenly female figure could connote several things all at once: she was, first, a dim memory, heavily suppressed, of a feminine adjunct to the Jewish deity, constantly attacked by the prophets, of course, as idolatrous, but still lurking; or she was the new Eve, facing out temptation once more and doing it differently this time; or she was - collectively and representatively now – Israel, bravely resisting the assaults of pagan oppressors such as the Romans; or she was the 'daughter of Zion', a Jewish symbolic female representative of Jerusalem, again refusing to be swallowed up by alien armies and overlords; or finally, for these new Christians who read the Apocalypse, she was probably *all* these things but at the same time Mary, Jesus's mother, who had given birth to the Messiah in the face of every obstacle of evil, but ultimately had been vindicated and taken up to heaven, even after a long period of suffering.

And if so, our early Christians would add to this rich but confusing list, finally, a last – but not so obvious - evocation, on which I want us to reflect: that if this woman in heaven of Rev. 12 *is* Mary, Jesus’s mother, then she is also the representative, not only of Israel, but of the Christian *Church*. For it is Mary’s human consent to bear the Messiah, to cooperate with God in redeeming the world in this cosmic battle between good and evil, that one may well see as the *first act of the Christian church*. Maybe you find this an odd idea, and yet it’s a cogent and powerful one: that the Church is actually *constituted* by you, me, all of us, repeatedly making acts of consent to God – of saying Yes, as Mary did at the annunciation, when we could say no; of choosing life over death; of opting to co-redeem with God rather than co-devour with the devil; of bringing forth, with much pain and labour, the birth of Christ among us. Without these repeated acts of prayer and faith and consent, we might say, *there would be no Church*. And if this is right, then the Woman in Heaven in Rev. 12 not only summons up this great nexus of symbolic associations from the Old Testament and the New in the person and figure of Mary, Jesus’s mother; but she’s also importantly about us, and the place *we* each have to play in the cosmic drama of salvation. And this, then, is what the Assumption is finally about: not just a fantastic star-wars myth about a cosmological Woman, nor merely a pious hope that Mary got taken into heaven, but a very concrete hope about the final outcome of all our struggles to *participate* in Mary’s human co-redemption of the world, Mary’s saying ‘Yes’ to God.

But wait a minute, you’ll say: if we are *all* Marian – men and women, the whole church, trying to say Yes to God - then why does it matter that she, specifically, is a Woman, assumed into heaven? Ah – it matters very much; because when you think about it, it turns the normal ordering of the world upside down. It takes the subjected and the lowly – the woman who is usually subordinated - and exalts *her*; and it casts down the proud and the powerful – as Mary herself says in the Magnificat that we have just heard as our gospel reading. And this is not the sort of power that merely emulates masculinist power: it tips it right up. That is finally what evades the power of the dragon-devil in Rev. 12: as it says in an ancient hymn to Mary from the Greek Orthodox church: ‘Hail, you who cast out – or chuck out – *ekbalousa* – the inhuman tyrant of old; hail, you who show forth the ... merciful Christ’ (*Akathistos* hymn, 3rd. ode). The Woman in Heaven, then, inverts the masculinist powers and dominations of the world.

If all this still seems quite fantastical, let me end with a comment about a painting that – for me – makes it all the more real. I went back to look at this painting in the National Gallery in London last week, because I wanted to see if I had remembered it aright. I hadn’t really; and when I saw it afresh I understood better how the 17th-century, Spanish painter – Velasquez - had so brilliantly probed to the heart of the meaning of Rev. 12. The painting is divided into two parts – unfortunately separated in the hanging in Room 30 at the Gallery. On the right-hand side is John, the writer of the Apocalypse, ‘in the Spirit on the Lord’s day’, as it says at the beginning of the book of Revelation, rapt in mystic vision, with a mini-version of the Woman in heaven and the dragon already swimming before his eyes. But on the left is a full panel of the Woman herself, strikingly Spanish and youthful (perhaps painted from a local girl), strikingly *human* and ordinary, yet also strikingly assured and powerful – standing with the moon under her feet and the

stars above her head. But what moves one in the picture is this combination of utter ordinariness and staggering authority: 'feminine' power *not* made saccharine (as in so many other paintings of Mary from the period in the same gallery), *not* accommodated either to the pin-up girl or to the simpering plaster saint, but treading down the forces of evil simply through the dignity of her own female humanity.

So if indeed it is this vision that we celebrate on this, our feast of St. Mary, it remains as subversive a gospel message as ever, as was first stated by the Virgin herself. 'He has cast down the proud and has exalted the humble and meek'. We place our bets, as Christians on the feast of the assumption, not on dragons nor on force of arms, not on worldly powers nor on masculinist video fantasies; but on the symbolic image of the Woman in Heaven, whose very ordinariness *is* the stuff of glory. She it is who we are too: those whose glory resides in simply saying Yes to God, in facing down the forces of evil (even as we struggle in that ongoing cosmic battle), and in bearing forth the Word.

May it be so for each one of us, *Amen*.

© Sarah Coakley, 2004