

MARY, MOTHER OF THE LORD.

SERMON PREACHED BY REV'D GLENN MAYTUM

If we were in the Northern Hemisphere this weekend, in France or Italy or Greece, for example, we would find this weekend is a Public Holiday: a "holy day". You can read in your desk diary that in France and Italy it is called "Assumption". In Greece, it is the "Dormition of the Theotokos".

And, traditionally for morning tea after church, many would be eating Soul Cakes. (They are not unlike Michaelmas cakes).

Remember the song? "A Soul cake, a soul cake, Please, good missus a soul cake; An apple, a pear, a plum, a cherry, Any good thing to make us merry. One for Peter, two for Paul, Three for Him who made us all".

Without going into all the images, Soul Cakes are like doughnuts- the circle representing the cycle of life. Eaten today they mark the traditional day St Mary died and went to heaven.

The Roman Catholic and particularly the Orthodox churches have interesting dogmas about St Mary and her death. Indeed, the Greek word "dormition" means "falling asleep". Hyppolytus of Thebes said Mary died in AD41.

For the Catholic Church, Mary is known under many titles. Sydney has St Mary's Cathedral. We have seen on t.v. these last weeks churches named after Our Lady of Lebanon and our Lady of Mt Carmel. "Our Lady Help of Christians" is the patron of Australia. We all watched in horror as Notre Dame in Paris burnt. St Mary is the Patron Saint of the USA. Her name has been given to the state of Maryland and to various cities, including the one we all know: "The City of Mary, Queen of Heaven, and of the Angels". (shortened to "Los Angeles").

The Orthodox church have a very interesting title for Mary: "Theotokos"- the God-bearer.

Mary has had, we could say, a chequered history for the Reformed churches since the Reformation. Once highly-regarded in England, she fell from favour as the reformers felt she was overshadowing the respect that should have been paid to her Son.

So, what DO we know about Mary?

Her name has been Anglicised from the Hebrew name Miriam; Her bparents are said to have been devout Jews Anna (or, Anne) and Jo-achim (meaning "God will establish"0; her cousin was Elizabeth and her nephew John (the Baptist); her husband was Jo-seph ("may God add").

So, how do you imagine her? What picture do you have in your mind? We typically see statues of a beautiful pale-skinned woman in long, white dress and blue veil- all symbolic!; beautiful hands and bare feet. She appears to be a blue-eyed Causcasian. A model for maybe Prada or Dior?

But, Mary of the Bible lived in a small, rural village in part of Roman-occupied lower Galilee (Luke 1:26) where, being a small village, everyone knew everyone and, consequently, everything!

In that part of the world she would have been olive-skinned, probably with a dark complexion. The one thing true from our modern images is, that as a Jewish woman, she would have worn some sort of covering, or veil, for her hair.

She married Joseph (Luke 2:5), a tradesman, or artisan, and a blow-in from the south, possibly a carpenter, which meant she married into a poor family, as wealth was held in land ownership.

That is why, in our gospel reading today (Luke 2:3-4) the little family had to go to Bethlehem, about 160 km south: Joseph, the family head, had to be enrolled in his tribal town. Joseph was a descendent of David. Bethlehem was David's tribe's city.

Whether in Bethlehem or Egypt (Matt 2:13-15) or back in Nazareth (Matt 2:23), Mary's hard, unpaid work taking care of the household as Scripture tells us in Mark 6:3, there are four brothers- James, Joses, Judas and Simon and some and some sisters, who are unnamed.

So, really, rather than statuesque, her hands and feet may well have looked like those of a hard, manual worker.

And, it is probable, like most poor women of her day, she would have been illiterate.

In Scripture (like 1:28) we meet Mary as a young Jewish woman whose faith would have followed the Torah by keeping the Festivals, lighting the candles and learning by rote and reciting off-by-heart the prayers which we see she knew from her quotations from the Psalms and Exodus in the long statement we call the "Magnificat", the longest set of words of any woman in the New Testament (Like 1:46-55).

So, what can we learn today?

I think it is good to reflect on the lives of those we call "saints". Like- our own St James. What did he do? Why did he do these things? Who did he influence?

My own saintly heroes are the great evangelist St Martin of Tours and the learned St Francis de Sales.

The Anglican church in Sydney regularly tells us lots about St Paul and his influence on the early churches and how his influence continues, today. St Benedict and St Francis are important to many here, at St James'.

While we can't find out a lot about Mary from Scripture, I think we can see that her relationship with God was very deep. In Luke 1:38 we see she walked by faith. While she was the "favoured one" in Luke 1:28, she is known for her words of the Magnificat, a statement full of political opinions about the coming Messiah (Luke 1:50-53) and the liberation of the poor from oppression (a place where she would most likely have found herself – Luke 1:53).

And, her faith in Jesus can be seen to be more than that of a doting mother:

By the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit, she conceived and bore the Word Made Flesh (Luke 1:35);

In John 19:25-27 we see at the foot of the Cross she kept vigil and saw Jesus' saving work brought to its perfection;

And, in Acts 2:14 we see she rejoiced in Jesus' resurrection and, joining her prayers with those of the Apostles, she was filled with the gift of the Promised Spirit.

In Mary, God shows us the greatness of His love and the purpose of being a partner in the work of redemption, which God intends for all of His children.

We can be inspired and encouraged by the lives of the Saints, and so, St Mary can be for us an inspiration and encouragement.

