

Feast of the Assumption of BVM
St Mary's, St Bede's, St Gerard's

Occasionally I have heard complaints from people that they find today's first reading disturbing, distasteful, grotesque. One of the Bishops of England and Wales some years ago actually forbade its use in the churches in his diocese. However no one followed up his appeal for change. We might ponder why some liturgists have thought this an appropriate passage for today's feast. What is going on with this dragon and the pregnant woman? Who is she?

The obvious answer is that she is the Blessed Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus. A frequent depiction of Mary shows her crowned with twelve stars, standing on a crescent moon, and treading on a snake. The serpent comes from the Garden of Eden but the moon and the stars from the Book of Revelation. This, however, is an interpretation which dates only from the Middle Ages. For much of the history of the Church Our Blessed Lady was not the foremost understanding of the Woman of the Book of Revelation.

The first thing to note, is that the passage is from Chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation. This final work in the New Testament is frequently misunderstood usually by people who have neither read the Book nor studied it with appropriate diligence. Apocalyptic literature is a particular form of writing which developed in times of persecution. It uses dramatic imagery, often nightmarish in tone, to describe the present day's horrors, often seeing them as echoes from the past or projections into a future time, but the message is always one of hope. However horrific what is happening now, God is in control and God will be victorious.

The dragon of Revelation is an embodiment of evil. It is red, the colour of blood and therefore of death; It has seven crowned heads and ten horns. Do not try and picture the dragon, that is the way to nightmares. We need to understand that John of Patmos, the author of this Book, is using a form of code. This is not to keep a message secret, but to reveal the inner nature of what he describes. It is very simple. Numbers have significance and images have meanings. The number seven, held by many to be a lucky number has across many cultures been seen as a number of perfection. The number three also is thought to have special qualities. Add them together and the sum is ten, a number which signifies wholeness. A head signifies leadership and a crown royal power. So the dragon is claiming great authority, perfect authority, which of course belongs only to God. The horns signify power. Ten horns equals complete, total power. Again this belongs to God. The dragon has ambitious designs. However, we are told its time is drawing to an end. Consequently its rage is furious.

The woman is about to give birth to a child who is whisked away by God to safety in heaven. This is Jesus' career described in minimalist tones. He is born; he ascends to

heaven. The two ends of his earthly existence stand for the whole. The woman is a symbolic figure of multiple meaning. A heavenly figure, crowned with stars which signify (as in the story of Joseph) the tribes of Israel. She incorporates the many maternal figures of the Old Testament: Eve, Israel, Jerusalem, Zion... She cries out in labour as she prepares to give birth. In the New Testament the image of a woman in labour describes God's people who go through birth pangs before the joy of giving birth (Jn 16,20-22) She is an heavenly image of God's faithful people (old and new, John of Patmos does not distinguish). Then intensity of her labour pains match the tribulations of the people before the birth of the age of Christ in the Kingdom. (cf 'birth-pains' -Mk 13,8 & //s). The figure then is the Church in its primary meaning.

The one who gives birth to the Saviour is also Mary and so it is proper to see Mary also as the Woman, for she is Mother of Church, the embodiment of Israel, the one who waits in expectation for the saving act of God.

The woman is saved by God who makes a place of safety for her in the desert as he saved his people making the wilderness a place of refuge from the oppression of Pharaoh. And we hear a heavenly voice shout, "Victory and power and empire" - things claimed by the dragon, "have been won by our God."

Mary in her Assumption into heaven anticipates what is the hoped for destiny of all God's people. As she was kept free from original sin, in her Immaculate Conception so we are released from original sin in baptism. As she from the moment of her death, her *dormition* as it was called in the early Church, her 'falling asleep', she was taken in the fullness of her person-hood, body and soul, to her Son in glory, so we hope to be fully with him in heaven.

This feast of Mary, like our somewhat grotesque first reading, speaks of the ultimate defeat of evil in all its forms, and the total victory of God.