**THE FEAST OF THE DORMITION OF THE MOTHER OF GOD**

The feast we celebrate today is one which is of especial value and devotion to the Orthodox, as it is to Roman Catholics, but one which, officially at least, goes uncelebrated in the Western Protestant Churches, largely, I suppose, because, like the Birth of the Mother of God, it is not directly mentioned in the canon of the New Testament, though it is mentioned in the non-canonical or apocryphal writings. The information which the Church has in the Orthodox tradition is richly preserved in the hymnographic material of the Feast and refers in detail and repeatedly to the assembling of the Apostles in the clouds from the ends of the earth at her assumption into heaven and the reception of her soul by her Son. This is the scene portrayed in the icon of the Feast and it is described both in the canon at Mattins and in the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite and St John of Damascus who are normally depicted in the icon. The hymns of the Feast refer to the joy and wonder at Heaven receiving her who gave birth to Heaven.

If we are honest with ourselves there is much also in the material which, while expressed in words of wonder, goes over our heads and leaves us unaffected. What is the significance of this feast, so beloved of the Church? What does it have to say to us? When we think of the life of the Mother of God there are two words which come immediately to our minds: joy and suffering. The word for hello or hail, which is constantly repeated in the Akathist Hymn to the Mother of God which is sung regularly in Lent and at other times too is exactly the word ‘joy’ in Greek. It seems to be a word in the Christian tradition almost exclusively accorded to and identified with her and it is the second of the spiritual gifts listed by St Paul in his letter to the Church of Galatia. The angel Gabriel greets her at the Annunciation with the pronouncement ‘hail’ or ‘rejoice’ and we sing at the end of every vespers in the Russian tradition “Mother of God and Virgin rejoice …..the Lord is with thee”. And yet at one of the relatively few incidents in which she is mentioned in the scriptures, the Presentation in the Temple, Simeon, in almost a casual aside, tells her that a sword will pierce her own heart also as we can see in the icon at the front of our church. This is not too difficult to understand as she sees her son acclaimed for his miraculous works and teachings, then rejected, despised and crucified like a common criminal. Few of us would have the stamina to stand at the foot of the Cross like her and retain peace, composure, faith and joy.

But that suffering must extend far wider, to the whole of creation and especially to mankind. In Orthodox thinking the Mother of God is the second Eve who this time does not cause the casting out of man from Paradise but fittingly is the exact opposite, the one who helps man to be returned there through her cooperation with the will of God. Some see Mary in a sense as the primitive Earth Mother of Greek religion but she is so much more In our faith because she is the best offering the world can make to God, not just as a most pure virgin but as one who is totally obedient and faithful to God’s call, “pondering all these things in her heart”, as St Luke reports. She is thoroughly human but also fit to bear God and in today’s feast she is united with God. It is interesting to look at the readings which the Church has appointed for the Feast. One of the Old Testament lessons read at Vespers is the dream of Jacob in which he sees a ladder rising up to Heaven and the angels ascending and descending on it. The epistle for today from Philippians talks about Christ emptying himself and taking the form of a servant. So the common theme of the feast seems to be of Earth and Heaven meeting and of God and Man coming together as it was intended to be. Hence the joy of the whole universe or created order. This is what we patiently wait and strive for as members of the Church.

There is much here which can be a salutary reminder for us on our journey. We too tread the same path as the Mother of God, of suffering and joy in so far as God measures it out according to our strength. Our destiny is God. Hence we groan longing for our home in Him and are genuinely restless in this world. We suffer in our sinful state here both through the sins of our own doing and that of the world in which we live. The Mother of God experienced this joy and pain in greater measure than we do and this qualifies her eminently to be our guide and protector on our journey. This sympathy with our condition at the deepest level is expressed nowhere better than in the prayer to her in the morning private prayers where certain phrases clearly anticipate the discovery of psychology and psychotherapy in the twentieth century as a method for healing a person. And the fact that nearly all our Orthodox prayers end with an invocation to her is a timely reminder of the role she plays in our salvation.

As we celebrate today the event of the Mother of God entering Heaven and we dwell on the experience of seeing the Lord, which one day by God’s grace will be granted to us, let us find that deeper joy of knowing the presence of God in our hearts and the care, earnestness and work of Mary ever virgin and Mother of God for our salvation.

“Neither the tomb nor death had power over the Mother of God who is ever watchful in her prayers and in whose intercession lies unfailing hope.”

***15th August 2022, Oxford***