**THE NATIVITY OF THE MOTHER OF GOD**

The troparion for the Feast of the Nativity of the Mother of God which you have just heard has these words:

“Thy birth, O Mother of God, has brought joy to all the inhabited earth: for from thee has shone forth the Sun of Righteousness, Christ our God. He has loosed us from the curse and given the blessing: He has made death of no effect, and bestowed on us eternal life.”

These words show us the importance of the role which a simple Hebrew girl married to a much older man plays in our own salvation and that of all the world for all people, in all times and in all places. Rightly do we celebrate her birth today, the first of the Twelve Great Feasts of the New Church Year. Without her fiat, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word”, the words of the troparion, “He has made death of no effect and bestowed on us eternal life” could not have become a reality for mankind.

Who is this young girl Mary, so crucial for our salvation? Her appearances in the gospels are limited. Only Luke gives us extensive details of her life before she gives birth to Jesus and of her family’s relationship with John the Baptist, the son of her kinswoman/cousin Elisabeth. Mark and John do not mention the birth but the latter introduces her at the wedding at Cana in Galilee. Her betrothal to Joseph is mentioned in both Matthew and Luke. The only other appearance is at the foot of the cross at her son’s execution according to John, who records how the Lord committed her to “the disciple who took her into his own home from that hour”. Elsewhere in the gospels we know that with the rest of the family she tried to reach him unsuccessfully during his ministry to the crowds of thousands who followed him to be healed and taught.

Much of our remaining information comes from the earliest traditions of the Church and a variety of sources. Her parents are known as Joakim and Anna in Orthodox and Catholic tradition, who promise her to the temple at a very early age. Her betrothal to the elder Joseph takes place in early puberty (mentioned in Matthew and Luke) but there is no information about his previous marriage and children. The Tradition of the Church has been that his first wife’s name was Salome and that her children were the step brothers and sisters of the Lord, perhaps the most famous of whom was James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem, later brutally murdered by Caiaphas, the head of the Pharisees. According to the earliest tradition Mary remained ‘ever virgin’ as we sing at the end of our litanies. She was taken to Ephesus in western Turkey where she lived with the Apostle John who died a natural death at a great age, the only Apostle to avoid martyrdom. The Falling Asleep of the Mother of God, her keemeesis or Dormition, is set in Ephesus where the Apostles gathered as her soul was translated into heaven by her Son who descended to receive it. The Reformed Churches of the West largely consider that she went on to have a normal family with her husband and that the children were full brothers and sisters of the Lord. The events of the Dormition are not generally accepted. This is what most low Anglicans like me were brought up to believe.

But having looked at the history of the life of the Mother of God, how do we experience her presence and her intercessions at a personal level? Perhaps you will allow me a few minutes to explain how I have come to know her. Having been

baptised into the low Anglican Church as a child into a non-church going family, I rediscovered my faith in my teenage years with the assistance of a teacher at school. At Oxford I belonged to a well-known low Anglican Church. In 1970 I went to Greece with a group of contemporaries and arrived at the town of Hierissos near Athos. A local barber who we befriended asked us to take his family to the feast at Nea Rhoda in our VW van. At the end of the church ceremony I looked up at the icon of the Mother of God which was being carried out of the church and was overcome with awe. Everything in me said it was holy but I knew nothing about how to fit it into what I had hitherto believed. As a result I began to tire of my Protestant rigours and started to explore the life of the Virgin Mary. Later when I lived in Paris I began to explore the Catholic Church and I found myself visiting the Chapelle at the Rue du Bac convent where the Mother of God appeared on two occasions in the church to a young nun, St Catherine Labouré and told her to bring people to the altar to pray to her and to wear a medal, the design of which she would give the nun instructions. After much opposition it came to pass, the medal was designed and today thousands of pilgrims wearing this medal visit this chapel to pray and ask the Mother of God for help as promised by praying the rosary and other prayers.

This discovery invited me to look at the other apparitions of the Mother of God in France and elsewhere during the 19th century: Lourdes, La Salette, Fatima in Portugal and San Damiano, Italy, to name but a few. And often the same pattern: appearance to a child or children or to somebody quite lowly; the Virgin’s humility, compassion for the world and encouragement to obedience and prayer, sometimes with specific instructions. The Virgin Mary or Theotokos slowly but surely entered into my prayer life both in the services of the Orthodox Church and in my private petitions.

In the Manual of Eastern Orthodox Prayers put together by Nicolas Zernov, which you see next to the Gospel and the Cross you will find the prayers for the morning and the evening. An Orthodox Christian should pray some of these and become familiar with them. Each of these contains a prayer to the Mother of God as our advocate. The first asks for help in removing despair, forgetfulness, lack of understanding and negligence. Then it continues by asking for help with the sins of the heart and mind: unclean, crafty, blameworthy thoughts and passions. Finally, in words that anticipate the development of psychological therapy it asks for deliverance from cruel recollections (memories) and undertakings (actions) which have a negative effect on our present situation and our spiritual progress. The evening prayer to the Mother of God simply asks her to pour out the mercy of her Son and our God upon our passionate souls and establish us in acts of righteousness for the rest of our lives.

All of this is her gift to us to remember today when she was born into our world.

***8th September 2024, Oxford***