

HOMILY 20th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME 2021
FEAST OF ASSUMPTION OF MARY

Lk 1.39-56 Prov 9.1-6 1Cor 15.10-26

Welcome to another virtual Mass as lockdown continues for yet another week, in these times of more than unusual unpredictability! At least we're staying safe, when we look at the NSW situation, with a record 466 cases announced just today. Where is this going? The most important action to take is to get vaccinated as soon as you can, not just for your personal protection and health, but for the good of the whole community, particularly the vulnerable. It is purely selfish not to do this.

Meanwhile, we gather in faith now to celebrate Mary's Feast of Assumption. It's great to have you join us in spirit.

As we jump now to Luke's Gospel for today's feast, it's a move to highlighting the role of Mary in the middle of it all, in the theological mystery of God's plan of salvation, as it's traditionally known. At the heart of it all is the necessary role of human involvement and co-operation, in taking the step forward, into the unknown, but with faith that it is the right thing to do, despite the doubts and uncertainty, as Mary demonstrates.

What's the old line of the song: "***From small things, big things grow***"? That is reflected here in Mary's role, from simple and young Jewish girl, now revered as Mother of God and Mother of the Church, and First Disciple, in the way she says ***Yes*** to the mystery of God's love and her role in the divine plan, but sensing it was the right thing to say and do, and moving forward into the unknown, but with trusting faith.

Often enough, I've referred to one of my favourite Beatles' hymns, ***Let it Be***, composed by Paul McCartney, in memory of his own Catholic mother, Mary, who died when he was a young teenager. Only on reflection, in later years, have I come to appreciate the deeper significance of this song, titled with the words of Mother Mary of today's Gospel, speaking words of wisdom and bringing assurance and peace of mind to those who turn to her. But the message goes much further, as we analyse the meaning of this prayer of Mary.

Luke's reflective, poetic hymn of Mary, known as the Magnificat, points to Luke's inversion Gospel message, whereby the poor and downtrodden will be raised up to happiness and rewarded, whilst the rich and powerful are to be dethroned, deprived and disappointed. It could be seen as a precursor to the Beatitudes, the fundamental charter for Christian life, as proclaimed by Jesus. A better future is promised for those who live by these principles, no list of rules and regulations, but words of hope, challenge, and call to action, for true believers.

From Luke's description of Mary's simple assent or ***Fiat*** in the Annunciation scene, we move to her Visitation of Elizabeth, soon to be mother of John the Baptist, the one to prepare the way of the Lord, to her prophetic words of faith and hope.

Interestingly, it was used by those espousing liberation theology in the 1970's, by South American theologians, to the chagrin or disapproval of some higher church authorities, and even banned in some countries at different periods. Gustavo Gutierrez OP spoke of the meaning being lost, if "*any attempts (are made) to tone down what Mary's song tells us about the preferential love of God for the lowly and the abused.*"

Doctor ***Google*** tells me it was banned from being sung in church in India during British rule, then in the 1980's, Guatemala's authoritarian government banned its public recitation, and when Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, whose children had vanished during the so-called Dirty War in Argentina, placed the words on posters in the centre of the capital Buenos Aires, the military junta outlawed any public display of the words! I wonder what now Pope Francis thought of that at the time, but have no doubt he'd have approved of the words in full, praying it daily as part of the Divine Office!

On the other hand, German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, later executed by the Nazis in 1945, said in a homily in Advent 1933: "*This song... is... a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.*" He also described it as: "*The most passionate, the wildest, one might even say,*

the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.” Unsurprisingly, Oscar Romero, as Archbishop of El Salvador, before his assassination in 1980, also refers to it, comparing the ordinary and humble Mary to the poor and the powerless in his own country. Until I did this bit of research, I had no idea that the words of the Magnificat were seen as so subversive and threatening to those with wealth and power, particularly in the political arena.

It starts off very humbly, with a faithful, grateful Mary glorifying God all-powerful, but then moving to a deep reflection on the injustices of the world of her time. To quote DL Mayfield: *“Mary, no longer just a silent member of the nativity... or an obedient and compliant girl... has helped me understand the true magnificence of how much God cares about our political, economic and social realities.”*

And so, from her initial ***Let it Be***, to Visitation, to Nativity to the Temple to Cana to the Foot of the Cross, we see Mary as the ever faithful First Disciple, her Assumption the acknowledgement of her showing all believers the way to fullness of life with the all-powerful, all-loving God, as revealed in Jesus, whose Incarnation among us demonstrates the mysterious ways of this God of love and life.

Perhaps, significantly, it was only in 1950 that Pope Pius XII defined Assumption of Mary as a dogma, after the two horrific World Wars, and 5 years after the dropping of nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the accompanying horrors of massive loss of life and long term suffering and devastation. It can be seen as a feast of hope in the goodness of humanity and the call of God for humanity to ultimately find the way to His kingdom of light, happiness and peace, by building the kingdom of justice, love and peace here and now, in our own lives and world, in the spirit of Mary’s Magnificat.

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15th August 2021