

The Most High Has Exalted Me

The image of exaltation is one of our favourite religious ideas: God is above, and can lift us up there beside him. It's a very medieval idea, though, and demands a very earthly point of view. You can climb the tower of the Cathedral and look down on the city: or climb the Mont Blanc Massif, and look down (you feel) on all Europe. But we've gone beyond that. We have views from the Moon, from space, and we no longer talk of them as being "high". They are simply "far"; and even they are a tiny smudge of distance, compared to the unimaginable vastnesses of space, measureless even in thousands of light-years. Does "exaltation" still work as a religious image?

Assumption Into Heaven

More than ever we don't think of the Assumption as a flight through space, but of a kind of acceptance of Mary on the part of God. She had her unique place in the human story of Jesus, in the story of redemption. We have lovingly meditated on this story, telling and re-telling the meeting with the angel, the birth in Bethlehem, the Way of the Cross, in words and pictures, in every sort of art, in every culture on earth. This too has been an Exaltation of the lowly virgin, as *all generations have called her blessed*. Today we celebrate the fact that her earthly story is only the prelude to an eternal experience, in which all process and partiality are ended in a full-on encounter between Mary and the Eternal, to whom she gave his sacred Hands, his holy Face, his true Body, his prophetic Voice, his human Heart, all his earthly presence, which made God present. No-one else on earth was closer to the mystery of his taking flesh. It seems completely right that we should meditate on her receiving of the eternal life for which we never cease to pray.

Ark Of The Covenant

We have no vigil Mass of this feast in our parish, which is a great pity; because there we would have heard that proud title for Mary, *Ark of the Covenant*. The original Ark was a piece of religious furniture, the chest in which

the Hebrews kept the twin tablets of stone on which the finger of God had traced the Ten Commandments of the Old Covenant. Above the Ark was formed a mercy-seat, sheltered by the wings of two angels. Before this empty Throne the Jews worshipped the Invisible God, the inexpressible One. Nothing could be more austere and spiritually pure than that regal emptiness in which God was not imagined, not depicted, and never defined.

Mary

But the woman, whose virginity perfectly mirrored the emptiness of the Ark, is made fruitful from God's Spirit, and the child that is born from her embodies the unsayable God. Jesus is the heart-stopping arrival of the divine: in full light, warmly human, fully to be loved and welcomed, and truly God. This new humanity is itself the New Covenant, and Mary became his Ark; before her we worship her child, whom she truly gave his visible form. To think of her, as *she went as quickly as she could to a town in the hill-country of Judaea*, is to see a new mode of progress for the Ark of God: no longer ceremonially borne by processional priests, but walking, hurrying, climbing the hills, bearing within herself the whole mystery of God for us. Here indeed is exaltation, a humanity risen to the heights: the hymn of Mary which is our Gospel today links her vocation as mother to this *raising up of the lowly* into the realm of marvels.

Humanity - As God Made It

Some people think that because Mary is caught up into the divine realm, she devalues the rest of us who labour and struggle here below. We must learn to think of her from the perspective of God the Father. He didn't make human beings to fail and falter, but to grow, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. If this should be a story of visionary hopes, long and industrious fidelity, the whole terrible and splendid story of evolution, it is for the terminus, the Omega-point of the story that God said *Let it be so*. Mary is our vision of exalted human nature; but a nature that is

ours to hope for.
Philip

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