

*15<sup>th</sup> August 2015*  
FEAST OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE  
BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

“Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.”

– *Saint Luke 1:28.*



“Blessed art thou among women.” These words, which the Holy Ghost inspired Saint Elizabeth to address to her cousin Mary in today’s Gospel, are rich in meaning, especially on this day when we contemplate Our Lady’s glorious Assumption into heaven, when the body in which the Son of God took flesh was reunited with her soul and taken to heaven, before it could undergo the corruption of the grave.

The archangel Gabriel had already used these words when he announced to Mary that she was to become the Mother of God. The Gospel tells us that Mary was troubled to hear these words. The reason is not what we might think: it was not that she had never heard such words; it was rather that she recognized them. We must remember that, because of the Immaculate Conception, Our Lady was not subject to original sin and so her intelligence was much purer and clearer than ours. In particular she had a great love and understanding of the Sacred Scriptures: in fact she understood them better than Moses, David, Jeremiah and the other sacred writers who composed the Scriptures under the inspiration of God. So, when the young Virgin Mary was surprised to hear to words, “blessed art thou amongst women,” it was because she recognized these words.

In the Old Testament we find these words, “blessed art thou amongst women,” twice: two women had been singled out for praise using the same words. These were Jahel and Judith, both of whom at different points in Israel’s history intervened to save the people from dangerous enemies. We read in the book of Judges of Jahel’s victory over the general Sisara: she “took a nail of the tent, and taking also a hammer: and going in softly and with silence she put the nail upon the temples of his head ... he fainted away and died” (Jgs 4:21). Subsequently a canticle of thanksgiving proclaims: “Blessed among women be Jahel” (Jgs 5:24). Likewise we read of the triumph of the heroine of the book of Judith over the cruel Holofernes: “she struck twice upon his neck and cut off his head” (Jud 13:10). Then follows this praise: “Blessed art thou, o daughter, by the Lord the most high, above all women upon the earth” (Jud 13:23). We heard these words in today’s Epistle.

The expression “blessed art thou among women,” therefore, invites us to compare the mission of the Blessed Virgin with these two women. How did they save the chosen people from their enemy? By crushing their heads. But who is the true enemy of the people of God if not Satan, whose very name means “adversary”? Soon after the fall of our first parents, God warned the devil that his brief victory one day would be undone: “I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: *she shall crush thy head*” (Gen 3:15). Jahel and Judith striking the head of their enemies, therefore, are merely the prefigurations of her who is most truly “blessed among women,” the Virgin Mary, who crushes the head not of an earthly foe but of “that old serpent, who is called the devil” (Apocalypse 12:9) himself. In the opening verse of today’s Mass we celebrate the great vision of a “woman clothed with the sun” – it is easy to think of Saint John writing these words with the memory fresh in his mind of Our Lady’s Assumption – and yet just after this description, the Book of the Apocalypse tells us that the ancient serpent, the devil, is at war with the woman and her children: in other words, he is at war with us. The Assumption is thus the feast of Mary’s triumph, the triumph of God’s plan for the human race restored: “Who is she that cometh forth as the morning rising, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, terrible as an army set in array?” (Canticle 6:9).

Unlike the warrior maidens of ancient Israel, however, let us not forget that Our Lady triumphs not by the force of arms but by humility. She herself tells us the key to her greatness: “my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, because he has regarded the lowliness of his handmaid” (St. Luke 1:47-48). At the beginning of God’s creation, even before the fall of Adam and Eve, sin was introduced to the world through the pride of the first fallen angel when he said: “I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the most High” (Isaiah 14:14). Mary teaches us to overcome pride by humility, sin by obedience. Humility is the greatest weapon against Satan because, as we read, “God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (James 4:6).

Today we celebrate the victory of Mary over sin and death in the great triumph of her Assumption. The grave could not retain her immaculate body for very long, and by the power of her Son she rose again and was assumed body and soul into heaven. As for us, we hope to see her in heaven, but after our death, we shall have to wait until the last day, when all men – good and bad – will rise again in the flesh to receive their final judgment. Our resurrection and assumption will not be so quick as hers; it shall be delayed perhaps for many centuries, even though our soul, if we die in the state of grace, will go to heaven, at least after it has been purified in purgatory. But the victory of Mary’s Assumption is a powerful incentive for us poor sinners. It reminds us that all our actions in this life – all our thoughts, words and deeds – have a value for eternity. Mary had the great merit of never refusing *anything* God asked of her. Even though, unlike Mary, we have defiled our souls by many sins, our souls can rise from their tomb when we make a good confession. We

should not be discouraged by our falls, but we should turn to our Queen assumed into heaven and ask her to keep us close to her Son. When we say our daily “Hail Mary’s,” we should remember that one day, “now” will *be* the “hour of our death.”

The last word I shall leave to Francis Thompson, our own Preston poet: a troubled soul if ever there was one, and yet one who was able to see in Mary’s Assumption the triumph of all that is good and pure, when he said:

Camp of Angels! Well we even  
Of this thing may doubtful be, –  
If thou art assumed to Heaven,  
Or is Heaven assumed to thee!

