

[Readings: Song of Solomon 2:1-7, Acts 1:6-14]

One of the many religious buildings which dominate the skyline in the city of Jerusalem is the Abbey of the Dormition, a German Benedictine monastery on Mount Zion, just south of the old City Walls. The Abbey which can be seen today is relatively modern, completed only in 1910 on a piece of land purchased and donated to the church by Kaiser Wilhelm II in 1898, but it is built on the remains of an ancient, fifth-century Byzantine church, and of a twelfth-century church dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Zion. It is said that Mary, the mother of Jesus, ended her earthly life on the spot where these churches were built, close to one of the sites venerated for its association with the Last Supper.

As neither the Orthodox nor Roman Catholic Churches speak of Mary's dying as an ordinary mortal, the modern Abbey takes its name from the Orthodox understanding of the feast-day we celebrate today – the Feast of the Dormition, or of Mary's Falling Asleep. But the complications, variations and even apparent contradictions in the history of the Abbey of the Dormition perhaps reflect those felt by different branches of the Christian church with regard to this feast-day.

As mentioned, the Orthodox believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary, at the end of her life, fell asleep and was borne directly into heaven by her Son, while Roman Catholic dogma teaches that she was assumed, body and soul into Heaven, leaving an empty tomb. Strangely, then, it is possible to visit a magnificent sculpture in the Crypt of the Abbey of the Dormition, in which we find Mary, apparently asleep, but described by the Abbey's own website, as lying on her deathbed.

Generations of pilgrims have come to venerate Mary at this place, to light candles and to implore the Mother of God to join her prayers with their own, perhaps not primarily themselves concerned with the details of whether Mary fell asleep, died or was bodily assumed, but rather with the combination of her humanity and her unique connection with the Son of God himself.

Those of us in the Church of England sometimes feel uncomfortable or confused about how we are expected to regard the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary. I am often surprised by how many adults and children ask me questions about the Church of England's feelings about Mary - and I have been struck even this week by a number of parishioners expressing varying but strongly held views about today's Feast.

Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, in reforming the annual liturgy of the Church of England, did indeed remove the Feast of the Blessed Virgin on August 15th from the Anglican calendar, protesting that there were no Scriptural grounds whatsoever for marking a particular day as the end of the Virgin Mary's life, as no such narrative is contained within the Bible.

Although many of us, accustomed to travelling on the Continent, or possibly trying to do business with people in closed European offices on 15 August, may have stumbled to the fact that this has continued to be an important feast in the life of Catholic Europe, Anglicans themselves have only started to mark the feast again since the year 2000, with the introduction of Common Worship.

The Church of England now takes this as a further opportunity to remember that it was through the child-bearing of an ordinary though humble and obedient mortal that God's intervention in our own salvation was achieved - when Christ was born of Mary.

Mary offers us a pattern of unwavering faith and obedience to God's will.

At the Annunciation, faced with the trauma of a pregnancy out of wedlock, which could have led to her rejection – or worse – by her parents, her fiancé, and her whole community, she promised, “Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy Word.” And our second reading this morning from the Book of Acts shows a mother, only weeks after the horror of witnessing the agonising and humiliating death of her eldest son, praying with his closest friends and followers in the clear expectation that God would once again send blessing upon his people.

We may have differing views on the Dormition or the Assumption, but we can all rejoice in an opportunity to be filled with joy and praise at God's gift of grace, at the vision of peace and justice, of hope and salvation, which found its embodiment in Jesus' life on earth, made possible by Mary's obedience and joy in the face of God's promises.

Songs of joy, of triumph, and of thanksgiving are often placed throughout the Bible into the mouths of women, who speak or sing for the people of God. Mary is no exception to this rule, and her Song of joy and devotion, the Magnificat, continues to be said or sung in Daily Offices and Sunday worship across the Christian church, inspiring countless worshippers, musicians and artists, as we shall be reminded by our beautiful Dyson setting of the Magnificat as our anthem today.

Mary herself was a humble human being. She shared in our human strengths and weaknesses – our love for God and for our families, our joys and our sorrows, our desire to work for a better world, and our fear that we have often failed to do so. She offered us an example of a devoted faith which withstood suffering and grief, and events which seemed wholly inexplicable to her, but which she nevertheless pondered in the depths of her heart, recognising that they too, were held in God's hands.

But most of all, she shows us that God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son, not only as a great Redeemer, but as a human being, born of a woman, who came to share in our pain and our rejoicing, to show us the way to live and to love, and for *this* we give thanks today for Mary, the Mother of God.