

St Mary Abbots, Eucharist

The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary 2021

Revelation 11:19-12:6

Romans 8:18-30

John 19:15-27

Where are you going to live when you retire?

Or you may already be retired, and have chosen somewhere smaller to live, or be rejoicing in remaining in a now quieter house.

My ideal place for retirement - and don't worry, I've not given this *too* much thought yet - is probably somewhere small and high up, overlooking the sea.

And I was pleased to discover, while on pilgrimage with the seminarians of the English College a few years ago, that Our Lady and I have similar taste when it comes to retirement houses.

We were driving round the seven churches of the Apocalypse, or Revelation, in Turkey, which is the kind of thing priests and seminarians do for fun, though I was rather flagging at six to eight hours a day on a coach, sometimes just to see a few scattered stones, there not being a lot left of some of the churches.

Our slightly camp northern priest would lead us in a litany early every morning as we set out, which always ended with '*Our Lady, Queen of Turkey, pray for us*', which was, I'm sure, a made-up title, though one she's no doubt glad to have.

One day we took a slight diversion to visit the house of Our Lady and St. John, just outside Ephesus. I was, I admit, a little sceptical, given that this house was only 'discovered' in the nineteenth century, by following the descriptions of the Blessed Anne Emerich, a nun in Germany who had visions of this house, which were then followed up after her death.

The house we found, after a steady climb up into the hills, the latter stages on foot, was a simple, single story building with one room. Even if not quite with a sea view, one could still feel the sea air, and imagine the view from just a bit further round the valley; or perhaps that was just the effect the altitude had on my imagination. It had been roofless, though has now been turned into a chapel; and, it was later discovered, had in fact been venerated locally as Mary and John's house since the earliest days of the church in Ephesus.

I make no judgment on those claims, but the house did have a great sense of holiness about it, as we filed into the dark individually and in silence, before kneeling to make our prayers, then filing out of a side door again, back into the bright Mediterranean sunshine.

Our gospel passage, in which Jesus, in His last act, hands Mary to His beloved disciple, and says '*Woman, behold your son*' and to him, '*Behold your mother,*'

could, a little like our trip to Mary's house, seem like a rather touching interlude, breaking off from the main story, in this case that of Jesus's crucifixion and death, but little more than that.

To see it as such would however be a grave mistake.

John's gospel, while it can be moving on a personal level, is imbued with symbolism at every turn. Nothing happens, or is described as it is, by accident.

In the synoptic gospels, the other three gospels, the women are described as being at some distance from the cross, but here we have Jesus engaged in this intimate scene with those who were closest to Him.

It is not however just a touching vignette, as he ensures that neither John nor Mary is left alone.

And indeed, the next sentence, which we did not hear just now, seems to refer back to this scene when it says, '*After this, when Jesus knew that all was now finished...*' That could obviously just refer to His life in general ending, but this scene seems in fact to be the last piece in the jigsaw, without which all cannot be said to be complete.

But how on earth can this intimate, if admittedly poignant, family drama, be essential to the great plan for humanity, and indeed the whole of creation, that is Jesus's life, death and resurrection?

We might, I think, find something of a clue in our other readings, both of which refer to great birth pangs.

'A woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.'

And from Paul: '*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.*'

We do not hear of Mary's birth pangs in the story of the nativity. We, with the shepherds, simply find Mary, Joseph and Jesus in the inn, suddenly appearing as the perfect, if strange, family, far from home.

And yet here, in the pain of the Cross, we are reminded of her earlier pain, as she stands, now watching her Son die, a sword piercing her heart as was prophesied. Something is also being born however in this new family begun in Jesus's last words.

We have little sense of what that new thing is at this point, but the Beloved Disciple, whom we assume to be John himself, is often seen as the ideal disciple. Peter may be *first* among them, but John never makes his mistakes, and it is he who reclines on Jesus's chest at the Last Supper.

And I do not think it is stretching a point to see the Beloved Disciple as something of a type in John's gospel for those other early followers of Jesus after His death, in the beginnings of the Church.

Earlier in the gospel you may remember that Jesus had left his earthly family outside looking for him, telling his disciples that his real family is those who do His will.

Well, now the two come together. Is John there to care for Mary, or Mary for him? Perhaps both, in different ways. And as Mary has earlier borne and raised Jesus, perhaps not always comprehendingly, as we saw at Cana, now she gains a new son, and if John is the representative of all disciples, then Mary becomes mother to all of us too.

The Church would be fully born at Pentecost with the sending of the Holy Spirit, but as at the birth of Jesus, so here Mary's birth pangs at the foot of the cross, on which she watches her son die, are essential to the nascent beginnings of this new family the Church, of which we are all part.

And so, if you are not convinced by some of the Catholic language around Mary as the Queen of Heaven and Mother of Priests, or indeed Queen of Turkey, I do think her position as Mother of the Church follows pretty directly from the status John gives her in this last act of Jesus's.

This typology and biblical interpretation is not all abstract theology however.

Origen, in the second century, said that:

'Nobody can really understand this gospel unless they too have reclined on the heart of Jesus and received Mary as mother as the beloved disciple did.'

There are lots of ways of reading scripture, and we do read and hear these powerful last words of Jesus as human beings, imagining ourselves into the story, imagining both the grief and pain at its heart, but also the love which blossoms out of it.

And while Mary may perhaps have retired to Ephesus, the church which she gave birth to in the moment of Her Son's death - that new family ordained by Jesus, of which we are all now part some 2,000 years later - was only just beginning.

We celebrate Mary today, on the feast of her Assumption, not just because she was Jesus's mother, or indeed because she is our patron here at St Mary Abbots, but because in His dying, she became and remains, Mother to us all.

Amen