

The Assumption

The Gospel reading for the Feast of the Assumption is Luke 1:39-56 which describes the Visitation of Our Lady to Saint Elizabeth and concludes with Mary proclaiming her gratitude through the words that we now call the Magnificat.

To rewind the story a little, Mary has just been visited by the angel Gabriel who has told her two important bits of news, firstly that Mary herself is to 'conceive and bear a son' and secondly that her older kinswoman Elizabeth is also expecting a son and she is 'now in her sixth month, for nothing is impossible to God'.

So why does Mary go 'as quickly as she could' to visit Elizabeth? There could be all kinds of human reasons why the younger woman might rush to visit the older one. In different ways they both needed the support of one another. However the gospel reading tells us that their first words on seeing one another were words of praise of God, reaching a crescendo in Mary's words in the Magnificat.

But why have this reading for the Feast of the Assumption? There is of course no account of the Assumption in the Bible, but the Church has given us these words of Mary to reflect on today because we understand them to express Mary's mind not only at the time of her Visitation to Elizabeth, but throughout her whole life, including her final moments on earth before she shared in her Son's Resurrection in a way which is unique to her and yet also points us in the direction of our ultimate destiny too.

What can we take from these words? First and foremost they are words in praise of God. Mary wishes those who in the future will 'call me blessed' to know that it is 'the Almighty who has done great things for me. Holy is his name.' Mary recalls his help and mercy in the past and it is in recalling with gratitude God's saving action in the past that she is able to have confidence that He will be with her in the present and future.

The importance of these words of Mary was quickly recognised by the church as it developed. They became not only Mary's words but words of Scripture that the whole Christian community could use in expressing praise and gratitude to God. They soon became a fixed part of the daily prayer of the church being sung as part of the evening office. In the Catholic church and other churches that follow a catholic tradition it is called the Magnificat from its opening word in Latin. It is interesting that even those churches that don't follow a catholic tradition still refer to it as 'the song of Mary' even though in the gospel reading Mary speaks rather than sings.

Nowadays there are many versions of the Magnificat ranging from monastic chant either in Latin or English through to some very contemporary settings. I provide a link to one below, but I am sure everyone has their own favourites.

Perhaps sometime over the coming days we can make time to reflect on these words of Mary and reflecting on them reflect also on the way God has provided for us in our lives. We can then unite ourselves with Mary and with the whole church in using the same words to express our praise and gratitude to him.

Video version of homily: <https://youtu.be/TrTSX4XPSpw>

CJM Music: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSYVdlxfpUY>