

August 15, 2023. Assumption of Mary. Rev 11:19a.12:1-6a.10ab; Lk 1:39-56

## **COMPLETELY WITH GOD**

### **Introduction**

Today's feast, the Assumption of Mary, goes back to a feast celebrated on 15 August in Palestine as early as the 5th century. People then celebrated Mary's death as her birth day in heaven, just as they celebrated the death day of martyrs as their heavenly birth day. Later, this feast was adopted by the whole church. Gradually, people in the West began to speak of the Assumption of Mary, all the way, soul and body.

It was not until 1950 that it was made a dogma. Some theologians considered such a dogma inappropriate. Others, on the contrary, thought it good that, after two world wars in which so many people had been mutilated and killed, this dogma pointed out the dignity of man, symbolised in the image of Mary taken up to heaven.

### **Assumption of Mary**

Baroque painters show angels carrying Mary upwards. They float, for they are not subject to gravity, as they are bodiless spirits. But Mary sits and is carried by angels and clouds, because she has a body. With body and soul, she is taken into heaven, as it is officially called in the 1950 dogma declaration.

This dogma is about a vision. This is not a historical description, any more than painters depict a historical event. Unspeakable and indefinable things can only be expressed in visionary images. Mary who is taken up to heaven is an image of man who is wholly completed. Naturally, the body is part of that.

### **The apocalyptic woman**

The liturgy also uses visionary images. In the first reading, from the Apocalypse, John outlines such a vision: *A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.*

But biblical and liturgical visions are also about ourselves. This also applies to the vision of the first reading. In the first place, the reading is not about Mary at all, but about the people of Israel, represented as a woman. The wreath of 12 stars on her head refers to the 12 tribes of Israel. The child the woman gives birth to is the Messiah. The woman is besieged by the dragon of evil: the enemies of Israel, violence, war, oppression.

*The woman herself fled into the desert where she had a place prepared by God,* as we read in the Apocalypse. This is an allusion to the fate of the people of Israel, who, having fled from Egypt, wandered in the desert, where it was

sustained by God. So the apocalyptic woman of the first reading is first and foremost Israel protected by God.

The apocalyptic woman also refers to the church. John, the author of the Apocalypse, wrote his book at a time when Christians were persecuted for worshipping only God in stead of the Roman emperor and his images. The book is resistance literature. It is written from the fundamental conviction that God's justice will ultimately triumph. It was written as a consolation book for a persecuted community, to encourage the believers.

In later tradition, the image of the apocalyptic woman has also been applied to Mary. The church then sees in this woman Mary taken up into heaven. That is why this text is included in today's liturgy. But remember that when tradition speaks of Mary, it was not only about her, but also about her as an image of the church.

### **Magnificat**

Something similar applies to the hymn Mary sings in today's gospel. Originally, it was perhaps a already existing hymn sung in the Judeo-Christian community in Palestine, put by Luke in the mouth of Mary.

She talks about herself: *My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour for he looked with favor on his lowly servant.* But in the same time, she represents true Israel which remains itself, which does not collude with the oppressor and with idols but remains faithful to the law, which - lowly and hungry - believes that God will bring a reversal in due time. Finally, Mary is an image of the church.

Today, on the feast of the Assumption of Mary, we also celebrate our vocation. What we are called to is presented in images and visions. And also the way to it: it is the way of the little handmaiden, who does not seek power and wealth, but believes in her vocation, and seeks her wealth in God who exalts the humble and lavishes gifts on the hungry. We celebrate a vision, which becomes a reality whenever we choose service over power.