

You will know how much I like this feast day to Our Lady, not least that it reminds me of large lunches and lazy afternoons in France when the Assumption forces a public holiday on whatever day of the week it falls. But this year, here in Exeter, we contrast the joy we may be feeling at the feast day, and the re-emergence of our Sunday mornings after this period of hibernation with the sadness and shock of the people of Plymouth following the murders there this week, and the news of the Taliban rapidly advancing on the capital Kabul in Afghanistan.

This is especially poignant as the focus today is on Mary as a mother and Mary as a woman – both these identities being threatened explicitly and implicitly in these advances of terror. Remember that God's decision to become human in Jesus Christ, his incarnation or in St John's words 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us', means that all human beings are very important to God, indeed that God is somehow changed by drawing that human into Gods-self. And the doctrine of the Assumption would have us emphasise that Mary is almost as close to God as Jesus, in her assumption into heaven body and soul. As members of the Church of England, we may sit more lightly to literal interpretations here, but nonetheless, the humanity and the womanhood of Mary are very important.

So how might we respond in this context to events in Plymouth or on the other side of the world? I'd love to have time to give you a fully worked out answer, perhaps on another occasion, but today, a sketch of an answer.

Instead of the rather triumphant imagery of the Assumption, we could look to the image of Mary in the *Stabat mater*, Mary at the foot of the cross weeping at the death of Jesus her son, appalled and horror struck, full of grief and bewilderment. In fact, it is only in the crucifixion that Christian faith finds any way through the difficult challenges of pain and suffering. We hear this account in the Eucharistic prayer which follows shortly. We hear also the account of the resurrection, how life triumphs over death, and we hold these two contrasts together; not that some of those folk in Plymouth will be moving towards resurrection. For them it's more like Holy Saturday, a time of grief and waiting before any hope of new life.

There is a final image of Mary which may be helpful, not contained in the Bible, but from the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola in the sixteenth century. He asks us to meditate on a visit the risen Christ might have paid to Mary his mother after the resurrection. It is unimaginable that Jesus would not have done this, given the biblical accounts of the visits he did pay to his friends. We imagine her surprise, her joy, her questions, and his joy and comfort.

So today perhaps those joint images of Mary at the cross and Mary greeting her risen son may speak to us more tellingly than traditional assumption imagery. Amen

*Fr David*