

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary
Sunday 13 August 2023
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sermon by the Reverend Chris Davidson

✠ *'The angel of the Lord brought tidings to Mary, and she conceived by the Holy Spirit.
Hail Mary, full of Grace, the Lord is with you,
Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
Pray for us sinners, now and at the time of our death. Amen.'*

The opening words of the Angelus. Recited or sung across the world and through the centuries, three times every day at six o'clock, twelve noon, and again at six o'clock in the evening.

Ave, Ave, Ave Maria!

Words that bring a glow into the hearts of those who have been brought up with a Marian tradition in their Christian nurturing.

Thank you for inviting me today when we are celebrating this principal feast day in the Virgin Mary's Calendar. It's a great privilege to be here. We're a couple of days early, but I think that's okay! The Feast of the Assumption, the Dormition, the Falling Asleep of the Blessed Virgin Mary, or simply, the Main Celebration of Mary's life in our Church Calendar.

This festival has been celebrated in the Church for longer than most of our festivals in the Calendar. As the Church began to sort out what it was about in those first centuries, a Calendar emerged that added Christmas, Epiphany, the Presentation, and the Transfiguration to Easter which had been kept from the beginning.

All these feasts have a direct influence upon us as believers, as they celebrate realities into which we can enter just like today's festival. The early theologians were clear that 'God became human so that human beings might become divine.'

If you're close to the altar at one of the simple celebration Eucharists during the week you will sometimes hear the prayer offered by the priest as the water is added to the wine in the chalice. *'By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity.'*

At the Council of Ephesus in 431 the title for Mary of 'Theotokos', Mother of God, was affirmed as the Church worked out its understanding of who Jesus Christ really is.

It was Mary who gave Jesus flesh and blood, brought him up, and who taught him to pray and to go to the Synagogue.

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You are all used to 'Godly Play'.
I wonder, how does Mary come into your life? I wonder?
I wonder what have you learned about Jesus from his mother? I wonder?

I have known Mary for as long as I can remember.

I first met her in the devotion that my own mother gave her in my early experiences in Church and at home.

I was nurtured in the Church of St Aidan's, Leeds, in the immediate Post War period. The 125-year-old basilica still stands proudly next to Roundhay Road, Harehills, about a mile from the Leeds City Centre.

My Granny and Grandad Davidson lived not far from the Church and I would visit them with my Dad, usually at the end of his working week.

I used to sit with my Grandad by the cooking range. He was an old soldier. He didn't say an awful lot but he was a kindly presence for me.

On the sideboard next to the fire in that little back-to-back house there was a small statue. You should have a picture of that carving of Mary and the tiny newborn Jesus done by my Uncle Max as an examination piece in his Art School training. I used to sit and ponder that figure, not really sure what the statue was and why there was a squirrel climbing up Mary's dress.

At Church I became a boat boy and looked after the incense and soon was able to relate Granny and Grandad's Mary to her outline on the small blue Guild of Our Lady banner, that in our processions always followed directly behind the processional cross and candles.

Mary was close to her Son throughout his Passion and Crucifixion.
'Here is your mother,' Jesus said to John from the Cross.
He says it to us too because we are part of Jesus Christ by our baptisms, Mary is our mother too and she cares for us.

You will have seen many icons of Mary.

There are the icons where Mary consoles us as she did Jesus, as our mother.

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There are the icons where Mary acts as an apostle pointing us to her Son. Do what he tells you to do she says in the Gospel.

Mary cares for us, prays with us, and brings us to her Son, the living God.

The Feast of the Assumption was the last festival in that early Church Calendar, the New Year beginning again in September with Mary's birthday on 8th September. Today's festival celebrates Mary's final earthly journey which becomes her heavenly journey to her Son and our Creator God. She bids us follow her.

Each of us here this morning is on the journey of our lives. Each of us is a pilgrim. This Cathedral is a great centre of pilgrimage. As well as welcoming pilgrims to this shrine for St Edmund it also sends pilgrims off on journeys out from here.

We all undertake a small journey every time we leave here, and we walk the way of Faith, endeavouring to be guided by Our Lord Jesus Christ and his invitations to 'come to me' and 'to fish for people'.

We try to model the life of Faith shown to us by Our Lord, to help those who seek the Lord Jesus, or to show him to those who do not know him.

One day our last earthly journey will follow Mary and we will remember Jesus's words to the disciples that he would go to prepare a place for us.

In the second part of the Angelus, Mary responds to the Angel:
'Behold the handmaid of the Lord.'

In our Gospel today we have just heard her Magnificat, the Canticle we use at Evening Prayer.

We learn about our Faith by taking part in the worship of the Church.

The liturgy we are blessed with, is the work of God for us to do.

So, the Angelus proceeds with Mary's words -
*'Behold the handmaid of the Lord;
be it unto me according to your word'.*

Mary only replied 'Yes' to God after wrestling within herself and questioning the angel. If she had said 'No' we wouldn't be here this morning, or here at any time for that matter, ever!

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No Mary, no Jesus, no Christians, no Church, no St Edmundsbury Cathedral, and that's why we are giving great thanks for her life today.

Before the Pandemic, we usually took our main holiday in Southern Germany and many years ago, we trailed our little family caravan for the first time, through the Shwabisch Alps, south of the Black Forest. We discovered a Benedictine Monastery with a wonderful Community Church hidden away in the forest.

It's Church is a huge basilica, like my beloved St Aidan's in Leeds, but much bigger and when I visited it for the first time, I was bowled over by the great mural over the High Altar, depicting Mary in Glory, accompanied by many angels being crowned Queen of Heaven by her Son, the Risen Christ. At Easter for many years I had sung the Regina Coeli 'Joy to thee O Queen of Heaven' without really taking on board its full significance.

Now, here we are today in St Edmundsbury Cathedral in August 2023 celebrating Mary's Festival and if we go into the Lady Chapel we will find an Art installation provided by my dear friend Canon Andrew. It's all about Mary, the Mother of God, Theotokos.

We see Mary the Mother in her kitchen. Less remote. More understandable. Less of a Maiden. More like you and me as Andrew says in his notes. More like you and me, and still the Queen of Heaven! Andrew asks us to pray by imagining her household, and reflecting upon our own, and by so doing to hear and see the Kingdom of heaven around us, in our homes and on our hearts.

So, today, we can see Mother Mary with the toddler Jesus in our Lady Chapel, in her earthly home. As we say our prayers, we may be blessed to glimpse Mary in Glory. If we see any more images of her today they will certainly show us Mary holding her Son for us all to see.

As the Angelus comes to an end we hear the third versicle:
'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.'

Mary received her Son, believed in him and what he was doing.

Mary became great because God became great in her.

In our discipleship, can we follow Mary's example?
'Pray for us O Holy Mother of God, that we may be made worthy of the promises of Christ.'
✠ AMEN.