

Vigil of the Feast of the Assumption  
August 14, 2010  
Fr. Joe Bambenek  
All Saints Church, St. Peters, MO

1 Samuel 15:3-4, 15-16; 16:1-2      Psalm 45      1 Corinthians 15:54b-57      Luke 11:27-28

This evening we celebrate what is a very Catholic holiday. In particular, we mark an item of Church dogma: the Assumption of Mary. As Catholics, we believe that just like Elijah and Enoch from the Old Testament, when Mary came to the end of her life on Earth, she was taken up, body and soul, into heaven.

With this backdrop, on a day when we focus on how her body was treated in a special way at the end of her life, I must admit that I found the gospel reading to be quite jarring. Someone gives praise to Mary, and in particular to the parts of her body that would have been most intimately connected to Jesus as His mother. Instead of joining in the choir of praise, the response from Jesus is to downplay, almost to the point of dismissing, the praise. As in several other places in the gospels, it almost seems like Jesus wants to have as little to do with his mom as some teenagers do with their moms. Our reaction can be to view this as a case of Jesus throwing his mother under the bus. However, if we listen carefully to His words, we do not hear Jesus dissing His mother, but rather, pointing people to something higher. In many different places in the gospel, Jesus downplays the natural bonds of family relationship, which were so very central in the Jewish culture, so as to highlight the importance of the supernatural connections that are established through Christian faith. But that does not mean that He dismissed them entirely. Jesus just did not want people to limit themselves to the clannish divisions to which they were accustomed, and which still exist in some parts of the Middle East, which divide people, rather than unite them. In this particular case, Jesus does not say, “No, Mary’s body is not blessed”; rather, He points to a higher form of blessedness than the material. Nevertheless, when I started reflecting upon this evening’s reading a month or so ago, it struck me as more than a bit strange; quite odd indeed; to be chosen for today when we celebrate the special treatment that God ultimately gave to Mary’s body. But as I came to reflect upon it more, I came to see that it sheds some important light on the message that we should be taking from today’s feast.

The first insight is that what makes Mary special is not that her body was in some way different than ours. She was a creature, a human being, made of the same flesh and bones of which we are created. There was not was anything intrinsically special about her womb or breasts. What made her special was how she allowed God to use the body she was given. Especially for my non-Catholic friends who are here to today, the reading that the Church chooses today should give solace. Today and every day, we do not honor Mary because of something intrinsic about her, as one would God. Rather, Catholics honor Mary on account of her assent to God’s will, her faith, and her role in salvation history. Whereas we honor and worship Jesus, not only because he died for us, but also because He was God; when it comes to Mary, it is all about her relationship with Jesus, all about her living faith. It is true that part of what makes Mary special is that her body served as the Ark of God for 9 months. Her doing so was foreshadowed by the Ark of the Covenant, the Ark that we heard being celebrated in the First Reading. Mary is due all the more veneration, but not worship, because she was not a passive Ark of God. Unlike the wood of the Ark that had no choice but to be used for that purpose, Mary assented to it with her will; she did what Jesus says is the source of true blessedness: she heard the Word of God, in her case spoken by the Angel Gabriel, and she

observed it. Mary said yes when presented with God's will, not knowing what that would entail. And she continued to say yes to His will through Jesus' passion and brutal death on Calvary, and ultimately to His resurrection, Pentecost, and as we celebrate today, her Assumption into heaven. This living out of faith is what makes Mary truly blessed.

A second insight is that we are created to follow the example of Mary; each one of us is called by God in one way or another to hear His word and follow it in self-giving love. While we each have been given different gifts by God, which are blessings in themselves, the true measure of our blessedness is not a function of what God gave us. Rather, our blessedness is judged by God based upon how we say yes to Him; and then, as a result of that yes, how we give back to God what He has given us, how we follow His word and serve Him and others. In the eyes of the world, one's value is often tied to one's skill or abilities. In God's eyes pure talent does not cut it. Instead, we are bluntly told by Jesus, "to whom much is given, much is expected." Personally, I am here this evening at All Saints to celebrate a Mass of Thanksgiving, to celebrate the way that God called me, and the yes that I eventually said to God's will for my life. While few among us are called to the priesthood or some other formal religious commitment, each one of us was created with a vocation, a God-given purpose in life. Many here have already found it; some may still be searching. And even once we find it, in some ways we are just at the beginning. Mary's yeses did not end with the willingness to bear Jesus... They continued, as I mentioned, all the way through life. Our ultimate blessedness comes from how we assent to God's will and strive to live out our vocation daily. Of how we live out self-giving love with our spouses and children each and every day. Of how we are faithful to God in prayer and generous to others, especially those who are poor or in need.

And third insight is that today's gospel has something to say about the value of our own bodies, and what makes for a truly blessed woman. We live in a culture in which women, in particular, are too often valued too much based upon the appearance of their bodies, rather than upon the goodness of their actions. One need only pick up one of the magazines in the check-out lines at grocery stores to see how women are glorified for how good they look, rather than the goodness of how they act. While it is a blessing to be created beautiful, such beauty is just one of many possible gifts that God can give to a woman. Physical beauty is a gift to be used for good, just as any other God-given gifts are to be so used. Jesus' stinging words remind us how God views human value very differently, if not opposite of our cultural view. Just as any time our values are askew from God's, our culture's ungodly preoccupation with physical, rather than moral, beauty has not been without consequences. The widespread suffering of women, especially young women, from problems ranging from rampant eating disorders to low self-esteem are the bad fruit of a wrong understanding of what is true feminine blessedness. On this day the Church puts forward Mary as the supermodel for women to emulate. Mary, through her faith, self-giving love, and obedience to God's Word showed the way to live out what it means to be truly blessed while being truly feminine.

As we continue to celebrate the special blessing that was given to Mary at the end of her life in the Assumption, we do so recognizing that while she was blessed in both body and soul, her role in the blessings was her assent in faith to God's invitation to the vocation of self-giving motherhood of the Son of God. None of us will have her vocation, none of us can be the Mother of God, but each one of us has a unique and important vocation. Let us follow Mary's example, let us listen for the voice of God, and let us follow it in faith, persevering throughout our time on Earth, so that at the end of our lives Mary, as a loving Mother, can welcome our soul into heaven... awaiting the end of time when our body, and those of all the faithful departed, will be assumed into heaven as well.