

Isaiah 61:10-11, Psalm 34:1-9, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 1:46-55

From the psalm:

“I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me out of all my terror. Look upon Him and be radiant, and let not your faces be ashamed. I called in my affliction and the Lord heard me, and saved me from all my troubles . . . Taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are they who trust in Him!

Today we are celebrating the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin, one of our Lady’s primary feasts in the Church year. We remember Mary at many times – certainly in the season of Christmas, when we celebrate with her the joy of the infant Jesus.

We remember her also in February, at the Feast of Candlemas – when she went to the temple to be purified, give thanks for Jesus’ birth, and hear the prophecies of Simeon and Anna about him.

Perhaps most important of all is when we remember her at the moment of the Annunciation, celebrated on March 25<sup>th</sup>, the moment when young Mary says “Yes” to the message of the angel Gabriel, and Jesus is first made flesh – conceived within her. The moment of Incarnation.

But on this feast today, we and Christians throughout the world particularly recall the moment when the story of Mary and Jesus comes full circle.

In the beginning, at the Annunciation, Jesus comes physically to Mary for the first time – making his home as a growing child within her. On this feast today, we especially remember how Jesus brings Mary to His presence in heaven.

This feast is known among Eastern Christians as the Feast of the Dormition – the “falling asleep” of Mary, at the end of her earthly life, when she once again sees her son in heaven. Among Roman Catholics it is called the Feast of the Assumption – when God raises Mary up into heaven.

In a sort of mirror of Jesus’ own Ascension, we commemorate, as we prayed in the opening collect, that God has “taken to [Him]self” the Virgin Mary, to “share the glory of [His] eternal kingdom.”

Mary is drawn up to heaven and reunited with Jesus. After experiencing the physical separation of Jesus’ Ascension, Mary is once more with the One whose whole life she had been present for.

Mary was with Jesus (of course!) from his conception and birth, through his childhood, into his time of active preaching and ministry, and to the foot of the Cross. She saw him resurrected. After his Ascension, she was there to receive the Holy Spirit from him.

The events of Mary’s life follow the events of the life of Jesus. She is his first and most faithful disciple. She shares his joys and sorrows. She loves him, and she grieves for him. She shows in her own self just how much the life of a follower of Jesus encompasses both joy and pain. Her life follows and mirrors the life of Christ.

The closeness of Mary's life to the life of Jesus is, in fact, one reason why praying the Rosary has long been seen by Christians as a powerful way to contemplate the life Christ. In it we meditate on the life of Jesus, and see how the life of Mary follows his same pattern and path.

Her footsteps, quite literally, follow his, and we are invited to witness his life through her eyes.

And this teaches us that God invites *all of us* to live our lives after the pattern of Christ – giving of ourselves for the life of the world, serving the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely. Praying for the world and living in communion with God and each other. Embracing both the sorrows and the joys of a life following Jesus – the life of a disciple.

Mary followed Jesus throughout his life. And after his resurrection and Ascension, she lived the rest of her days as a disciple, and must have continued to know the joys of sharing the Gospel and the sorrows of persecution, along with the countless everyday joys and sorrows of human life.

And though of course because of the Holy Spirit she had a connection to Jesus on earth after his Ascension, as we all do, still it must have been such bliss when, at the end of her own life, she was able to be with him physically again, when she met him in his resurrected body in heaven. Perhaps this is why in our opening hymn “Sing we of the Blessed Mother” we sang of Mary's many joys and sorrows, but finished with this line:

“Sing the chiefest joy of Mary when on earth her work was done, and the Lord of all creation brought her to his heavenly home; where raised high with saints and angels, in Jerusalem above, she beholds her son and savior reigning as the Lord of Love.”

Today, then, we remember the “chiefest” joy of Mary. It's a bit hard for me to imagine a greater joy than Mary must have felt when she first held Jesus in her arms as a baby.

But then, she already knew something of the pain that human life includes, and the wise men foretold how this would be true even for Jesus when they brought him the gift of myrrh – a burial spice.

Mary lived to witness and experience many sorrows with her son, from the flight into Egypt after Jesus' birth, to the mockery of the crowds and the pain of the Cross.

And so yes, it must be bliss for her to hold him once more in heaven and know that the sorrows of life are ended for them. That in eternity, they - and all of us - can share the bliss of paradise, where there is no sorrow or pain or sin, and life is the pure joy God always intended for it to be.

And so for us, who are still walking in the path of discipleship, who can taste right now the sweetness of life's joys and can hope in the resurrection, but who still also experience sorrow and pain, sin and death. Let us find comfort and hope in the story of Mary's life, death, and union with God. And in the stories of all the disciples who have travelled the path ahead of us, following the footsteps of Christ, knowing both sorrow and joy, and at last finding the bliss of eternity.

And most of all, may we find our hope in the one who blazed that path for all of us – Jesus, our guide, our joy, and our savior.