

Bring Blossoms the Fairest

Over the past week I have been pondering hard on how we can all connect our celebration of Mass to our everyday life. My thoughts quite naturally continue to be filled with the whole Paschal mystery of the resurrection of Jesus. I continue to rejoice each time the Paschal Candle is lit remembering the Easter Proclamation with its call to rejoice. In a way each time we get up in the morning during Easter-tide we should activate the lighting of the candle by lifting up our hearts to rejoice. These thoughts have been accompanied with a lively remembrance of the Blessed Virgin Mother Mary during this month of May which has been especially associated with Mary for several centuries.. Prayerful reflection has made this come alive for me and this was intensified by a lovely article I came across written by Bishop Frank Griswold, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church in America. The article is entitled "Meeting Mary" and it begins with the opening line of one of Gerard Manley Hopkins poems;

May is Mary's month, and I
Muse at that and wonder why. . . '

Bishop Frank goes on to point out that Hopkins's connects Mary's motherhood with nature's motherhood revealed in spring. I revisited the poem and was really touched by it and I was especially taken with the words:

Mary sees, sympathising
With that world of good,
Nature's motherhood. . .

This ecstasy all through mothering earth
Tells Mary her mirth till Christ's birth.

The connection with Mary's fecundity and that of the natural world touches me at a deep level of my consciousness by drawing together the great themes of creation, birth, motherhood, nature, and resurrection. There is a blending and interconnection as with a woven tapestry – the rich tapestry of life itself.

The experience of the fundamental goodness of creation and the awe and wonder we have at God's gracious provision has surely to traditions that go far back into antiquity. . In Celtic Britain, the first of May was "Beltane," a festival which celebrated the taking of the flocks to their summer grazing. May blossom (usually Hawthorn) was gathered and all this gave rise to an exuberant celebration of splendid juiciness of life. Floral garlands were made and poles were decorated with blossoms and ribbons in a profusion of colour expressing the sheer joy of the new life of spring. This was accompanied by music and dancing which is the origin of the Morris dancers we see at country fairs and folk festivals today. What a thrilling festival of life and goodness of all creation it must have been!. No wonder it was something to sing about; even from the rooftops as is

demonstrated by the ancient tradition of singing in the dawn on May-day from the top of Magdalen tower in Oxford.

As Christianity grew in England these ancient celebrations were taken over by the church and were appropriately taken up as celebrations of Mary as the Mother of the God who both is creator and saviour of the world. Mary became the centre of devotion and she becomes the figure that is garlanded and crowned with flowers. Mary is clearly experienced as a warm intimate part of life for the people of those times.

In many churches in both Britain and America May is jubilantly celebrated as Mary's month with Mary's statue being crowned by children and adults. Is this just sentimental devotionism? Perhaps for some it is but that's not all bad is it? At best however it will be a real rejoicing putting the participants in touch once again with the sheer goodness of creation. of God's super abundant generosity and of our mandate to exercise our stewardship responsibly.

My reflection now turned to the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) from Vatican II where Mary, as the Mother of God, is rooted deep within the life of the whole church. The teaching on authentic devotion given there is the foundation for Pope Paul VI's apostolic exhortation (*Marialis cultus*) in 1974 and John Paul's encyclical (*Redemptoris Mater*) in 1987. The guidelines to be drawn from all the Conciliar and Post-Conciliar writings suggest that all honouring of Mary should be imbued with the great biblical themes of salvation history. Bearing this in mind we can enter with enthusiasm into making May a great celebration of Mary and Paschal joy. As I think about ways of doing that apart from the community celebrations I am struck with the words of Mary's Magnificat; not just as a sweet song but as a radical commitment to social justice in the light of God's bounty. Perhaps we could pray and reflect on it each day either personally or with family or a group of friends.

In conclusion I come back to the words of Bishop Frank Griswold

During this month of May – Mary's month- I invite you to let her enter your life... may Mary's companionship help us to enter more deeply into the events of the Ascension and Pentecost. May her example of unwavering availability to God's strange and unsettling ways invite our fuller participation in God's continuing work of drawing all things together in the bond of life.¹

¹ See the whole text of Bishop Griswold on the internet at www.ecusa.anglican.org/1275_36420_ENG