

Dormition of the Blessed Virgin Mary sermon by Andrew

18 August 2019 Mary and the Dragon

Revelation 11:19–12:6; Galatians 4: 4-7; Luke 1: 46-55

Well there aren't many readings that give you a real live dragon. The bit of Revelation we've just heard makes you wonder whether John wasn't taking some mind-altering substance to come up with what really is more a nightmare than a dream.

We begin with a scene that could have come from "Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark". The Ark of the Covenant surrounded by flashes of lightning, crashes of thunder, the very earth shaking and a blizzard of hailstones. The symbol of God's promise, encompassed on every side by signs of terror.

But this scene gives way to an even more extraordinary vision. A woman clothed with the sun, the moon beneath her feet, and crowned with twelve stars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. And from her there comes the cry of all humanity. The absolute vulnerability of bringing any child into the world. If you're a parent you'll know. This is the love that keeps you awake at night, over the years empties your bank balance, and pierces you to the heart. One of my sharpest memories of the night my eldest daughter was born was of leaving the Royal Infirmary in the middle of the night, something like four in the morning, and just overwhelmed by the emotion of it all; but also feeling a strange kind of indignation, because this was right in the middle of the Falklands War – and I remember thinking, "How dare anyone be fighting when my little girl has just been born!" Like all of that should somehow stop, just for her.

But the point of this fantastic amazing story is to say that from God's perspective, I wasn't wrong. At the cry of any mother, at any child's first cry, the whole world should stop what it's doing, and, yes, put away its weapons and fall down on its knees and worship.

So Mary stands in that place of vulnerability and hope and trust and joy for all of us. She is pregnant with the divine life that's always creating new things. One of her ancient titles was Theotokos, the God-bearer – and we are all God-bearers, and every one of us can bring new life to birth daily.

Now I like this picture of Mary, because here she's like us – she cries out in pain and fear as we do; but, she's triumphant! She gets her crown. If you go into the Catholic Cathedral here in Edinburgh you'll see a huge mural on their chancel arch of Jesus crowning his mother – which is the reward for one who has endured to the end. Mary never gives up. Her whole life is a great Yes to God. Not always an easy Yes. Not a glib Yes. But she says Yes anyway, because at the foot of the Cross she's still there; and on the day of Pentecost she's with the disciples when the Spirit comes. At every stage of the journey Mary is solidly present. Jesus couldn't have shaken off this mother even if he'd wanted to.

Sometimes I try to imagine what Mary looked like. What would her hands have looked like? I think she'd have had hands red and roughened from years of washing clothes and scrubbing floors, kneading bread and hoisting up water from the well. These are not Fairy

Liquid hands. She'd have had arms strong and solid from years of labouring and carrying. My Mary looks a bit like some of those women you see in those heroic Soviet statues, sleeves rolled for working in a factory or possibly taking on an army. Or a softer image is a lovely painting by Vermeer you might have seen of a servant girl pouring milk, her hair scraped back out of the way to let her get on with her work, and, again, sleeves rolled up and red, work-roughened hands. Or as an iconic Scottish image, not to be too serious, how about Maw Broon, managing the ups and downs of her impossible unruly family?

So this is a real woman, a real mother, a real human being, and she's seen by many Christians as an abiding symbol of comfort and of strength precisely because this is so. And when your life is tough and things aren't working out she's there to remind us of a love you can't shake off no matter what happens to you or what you do.

This is a Mary, heroic and triumphant before whom the powers of this world tremble indeed. It's worth noting that for the movement which was called Liberation Theology which emerged in South America in the 1970's and 80's, the Magnificat of today's Gospel struck such a chord with poor people struggling to find their own voice, that their oppressive governments and even the Church took fright. For them Mary's Magnificat was more dangerous than Karl Marx. Because this is a charter for human freedom and hope and it flows from the lips and the heart of a woman, and a poor woman at that.

From this world of ours in which the dragon of fear and violence devours so many lives in so many ways, the cry of each and every child, each and every mother, father, reaches the heart of God as if they are the only one. But the point of this cosmic story is that in God's kingdom for every suffering mother there is a crown, and for every child a resurrection. That's the vision for which we labour here with joy, to make that vision real – not just in a dream – but right now.