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*May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD, my strength, and my redeemer.*

Today marks the conclusion of the final great fast of the Christian year—the Dormition fast—which we as a chapel have been observing both with poetry and with private discipline over the past two weeks. Yet, the Dormition fast and feast is certainly one of the stranger moments of our liturgical year. It is not immediately clear what it is toward which we are moving, or where we have arrived this evening. After all, holy scripture makes no mention of Mary’s “Falling Asleep” or “Dormition.” It is perhaps the least ‘obvious’ fast of the Christian year.

The Nativity fast marks our pilgrimage to Christmas, to the incarnation of Christ, the enfleshment of God. Eternity enters into time; time is lifted up into eternity. The Great Lenten fast similarly marks another important pilgrimage—our pilgrimage to the cross, where God condescends to the very lowest depths of human suffering and depravity, in order that the whole of creation might be made anew. Says St. Paul, “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

Perhaps, it isn’t too difficult to understand why it is that we fast during these occasions in the Christian year. There are many answers to this question; here is just one: we fast, paradoxically, in order to be filled—in order that we might receive different and better gifts than those we consume in our ordinary lives, which, in our ordinary state of unattention, we are unable to receive properly. According to this understanding, it is perhaps no surprise that the great fasts coincide with the periods immediately preceding Christmas and Easter, the great feasts of incarnation and redemption. What we are to receive—to bear in ourselves—in both cases, is the mystery of Christ: “the revelation of the hidden depths” of God’s love toward us and towards the *whole* of creation.

Incarnation and reconciliation. “But be of good cheer,” says Christ, “I have overcome the world.” God has accomplished all things through his Son. We are reconciled to the divine. The great chasm between humanity and divinity has been bridged, not because of anything we have done, but because “God so loved the world.” These feasts and fasts, then, remind us of the generosity of God. They reveal in time an image or symbol of eternity, in which we mysteriously participate, not only in the liturgy but in the whole of our lives, purified, illuminated and perfected by divine light.

Why, then, this third period of fasting? The church has already recollected the incarnation and the self-sacrificing and reconciliatory love of God. What more is there that needs to be done?

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It is true that there is little firm historical data regarding Mary’s life following Christ’s ascension. What we do have are a variety of often contrasting oral accounts of her life and death, written

down from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century onwards, as well as certain speculations about her death by the early church fathers. Saint Epiphanius writes in the 4th century, “Scripture simply kept silence [on this mystery] because of the overwhelming wonder, not to throw men's minds into consternation.” He concludes not with *doctrine* about her death, but with wonderment and with prayer: “For I dare not say—though I have my suspicions, I keep silent. Perhaps, just as her death is not to be found, so I may have found some traces of the holy and blessed Virgin.” Today, we celebrate the Dormition of Mary, not as a merely dogmatic position about her death, but by recollecting in wonderment both her life and “the uniqueness of her calling, a uniqueness *which yet includes us all within itself.*”

I want to suggest that we can look at the Dormition fast and feast in much the same way that we look at Trinity Season in the church calendar, the ancient season of the church year immediately following Pentecost and extending all the way to the beginning of Advent. Fr. Crouse of blessed memory writes, “The intent of these lessons [in Trinity Season], and the lessons for the following Sundays, is to show how the virtues and graces of Christian life are based upon and derived from the manifest charity of God, God's free grace, the mystery of love.” In other words, the work of *sanctification*—our growth in holiness—has only just begun. The lectionary in this season comes to centre in successive weeks on the purification, illumination and perfection of our lives in Christ. The epistles and gospels selected for each Sunday tend to examine the passions and their *transformation* in Christ. Our loves require *conversion*. This is the message of Trinity Season. God has accomplished all things in Christ; what is left for us is to grow in love and in virtue, in mercy and in truth, in righteousness and in peace, which may happen in this shared life, by repentance, by faith, by the continual conversion of our loves. What is left for us is to *receive* His gifts, and further, to *conceive* Christ within us. Lancelot Andrewes is especially clear on this point: “to conceive is more than to receive. It is so to receive as we yield somewhat of our own also. A vessel is not said to conceive the liquor that is put into it. Why? Because it yieldeth nothing from itself. The Blessed Virgin ... [however] did both give and take. Give of her own substance whereof his body was framed; and take or receive power from the Holy Ghost.”

It is a mistake if we see Mary either as a mere indifferent vessel, or at the other extreme of exaggeration, as a kind of divinity in her own right. Both these readings are rightly rejected by the Anglican divines, at the beginning of the English reformation, and neither of these readings have a place in the Church fathers. On the contrary, she is the *theotokos*, the *god bearer*, the *new Eve*, “bone of our bones, and flesh of our flesh,” mother of God and the mirror of all virtues, in whom God saw fit to conceive the very life and light of the world—“the love that moves the sun and other stars.” The uniqueness of Mary’s calling—“blessed art thou among women”—is nevertheless also a paradigm in which we all share. We are called in this Trinity Season and in the life of the church more broadly, *precisely* to be bearers of God—*theotokoi*—bearers of the image of Christ in our souls. In this sense, these Marion feasts and fasts have everything to do with our lives.

The very substance of human life and nature—flesh and blood, joy and agony, soul and intellect—proves not to be an obstacle of God’s working, but the very means by which He effects the reconciliation of human and divine. “When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man: thou didst not abhor the Virgin's womb,” says that ancient hymn, the *Te Deum Laudamus*, which we say each morning in the office. In the figure of Mary, the goodness of the body and the

goodness of creation is affirmed. It is within her womb that the reconciliation of God and man takes place: *Mercy and truth are met together / righteousness and peace have kissed each other*, and this, because Mary gives her consent to give her substance to God. The apparent oppositions, mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, humanity and divinity are met together only by the willing humility of Christ's mother. In Mary, too, all of the various joys and sorrows of the human heart and personality are unified: "My soul doth magnify the Lord" she cries in joy. Not much later, Simeon will disclose to her "Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." Neither the joy nor the sorrow predominate. Opposites are unified. As Fr. Curran frequently reminds us in this chapel, one of the unique qualities of this religion is that "we are called to rejoice and mourn, at the same time and for the same reason." When we do this, we are following the example of Mary, who hides neither her joy nor her sorrow, who gives herself over to be wounded by love.

What does this feast of the Dormition have to do with our life together in the chapel—the mysterious falling asleep of Mary, the mother of Christ, about which we know so little, and toward which we can approach only in great wonder in glorious unknowing? If the Annunciation marks the entrance of eternity into time, and time's gathering into eternity, surely the falling asleep of Mary, however this may have been accomplished by God, marks a return to this intersection of time and eternity. We recollect God's providential care for his Mother, for all of us, and for nature as a whole, which is made new in Christ. We also recollect in Mary, how we are all to be bearers of Christ and bearers of one another *in* Christ.

There is a moment in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which an elder monk, Fr. Zosima, encounters a woman struggling with her faith.

"How can I retrieve my faith?" she asks, "According to what proofs?"

Father Zosima replies, "One cannot prove anything here, but it is possible to be convinced."

"How? By what?"

"By the experience of active love. Try to love your neighbors actively and tirelessly. The more you succeed in loving, the more you'll be convinced at the existence of God and the immortality of your soul. And if you reach complete selflessness in the love of your neighbor, then undoubtedly you will believe, and no doubt will even be able to enter your soul. This has been tested. It is certain."

As I leave this place for another pilgrimage, I am reminded that my experience of this chapel has been a place of learning—learning to bear one another's burdens in deed and in prayer, learning to inhabit each other's wounds and the wounds of the world, however imperfectly, learning to be carried, learning not to conceal sorrow or joy, but to fall into the mercy and love of God. This is a difficult task, the task of a lifetime of turning and conversion, of repentance, of prayer and of friendship, but in the example of Mary, whose falling asleep we commemorate today, we pray that "in all our works begun, continued, and ended in God, we may glorify His holy Name."

We are right to contend that Christ has come to no person more fully and completely than to Mary, who bore Christ bodily and "in great humility," and yet, he is present to us here more deeply still in sacrament. And so it is that we approach the mystery of the Eucharist at the end of this fast and this feast, rejoicing and mourning at the same time and for the same reason. We

approach the Eucharist “to be filled when we are empty,” as Mary consented to bear the life of the world in her womb. That in being wounded we might become the wounds of Christ for each other.

*Mercy and truth are met together: righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

*And Mary said,*

*My soul doth magnify the Lord,*

*And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour,*

*For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.*

*For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.*

*For he that is mighty hath magnified me;*

*And holy is his Name.*

*And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.*