

**23rd August 2020**  
**Fr Chrysostom MacDonnell**

**Leavetaking of the Dormition**  
**11th Sunday after Pentecost**

Today is the Leavetaking of the Dormition, that is, the final day of the great feast of the falling asleep of the Theotokos. From what we have received in Holy Tradition, preserved and handed on faithfully in the memory of the Church, we receive the story of her assumption into the kingdom of heaven; of how the apostles themselves found her tomb empty.

We have no evidence for this event, save in the negative sense, in that the Church claims to possess no relics of Mary's body, as there are relics of the other saints and martyrs. The story is not even in the Bible but falls outside what St Luke recorded of the early Church in the Acts of the Apostles. Yet it is one of the twelve Great feasts of our calendar, and this morning I want to expand on what I preached to you on the eve of the feast itself; on the idea of Mary as the mystical throne of Christ. I also want to explore further how Orthodox Christianity has read and understood the Old Testament, for this is important to our theme today.

Firstly, if we look at all the feasts of the blessed God-bearer, Mary, we see an engaging parallel with those of her Son, sometimes prefiguring, at other times echoing what happens in Christ's life on earth. We celebrate the Annunciation of Christ, and also the conception of the Virgin; we have Christ's nativity, as also the birth of His mother. We have the feast of the Meeting, commonly called Candlemas in England, and we have the presentation of the child, Mary, in the temple as well. Christ ascended into the glory that He had always shared in the Trinity; and this day we let go of the feast of Mary's assumption into that glory, body and soul.

These parallels are not the clever devices of liturgists and makers of Church calendars. For where the pages of the gospels record the whole economy of salvation in the life of Christ, we see reflected in the Church's memory of the Theotokos, that mystery of salvation worked out in a paradigm life; an exemplar; a life lived on earth as already in the kingdom. We need hardly be surprised, for in

her we see the promises of the gospel fulfilled. As St Paul tells the church at Corinth, *'For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us... was not Yes and No, but in Him was Yes. For all the promises of God in Him are Yes.'* [2 Cor.1:19-20] In short, Mary's Dormition in the flesh is proof-positive that the gospel works! A yes to a promise that goes back to the patriarch Abraham of the old covenant, that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Staying with those ages before Christ, we read in the books of Chronicles the stories of the ancient kings of God's old people, Israel. Referring to Solomon the Wise, we read in chapter nine, *'Then the king made a great throne covered with ivory and overlaid with pure gold. The throne had six steps, and a footstool of gold was attached to it. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them. Twelve lions stood on the six steps, one at either end of each step. Nothing like it had ever been made for any other kingdom.'* [2 Chron.9:17-19]

Thus the Bible describes Solomon's throne in Jerusalem. We might read this as a mere historical detail; no more important than the old wooden coronation throne in Westminster Abbey. More impressive perhaps but that is not all. King Solomon the Wise, the son of David, was an anointed king of Israel and he lived in what Israelites thought of as the golden age of their story. As king, he was a messiah, that is, an anointed one. He was, therefore, in our eyes - the eyes of faith - a *type* of Christ. And this is how we interpret the Old Testament: as a series of types; we read according to typology. That means we see figures and events in these scriptures as somehow foreshadowing what is to come in the life of Christ among us, and thus to be recorded for us in the New Testament. So it is that we see Solomon as prefiguring the Christ, a *reverse echo*, as it were, of the one who will be born of that same line of descent. And if Solomon himself is a prophecy of Christ, then in that throne he sat upon we see a type, a prefiguring, of the one whose falling asleep we have commemorated. In other words, when we imagine Solomon enthroned in all his glory, to use Christ's own words, we can also picture the Christ child, enthroned on the lap of His mother in thousands of icons.

Thus, following the tradition of the fathers of the Church, fathers like the great St Irenaeus, whom we also commemorate today, when the Church reads the Old Testament, she reads in the Spirit and interprets with that binding authority given by Christ himself after the resurrection. *‘These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you,’* says Our Lord in Luke’s gospel. *‘That all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me. And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.’* [Lk.24:44-45] This is well beyond any individual’s interpretation or understanding of the Scriptures. For the canon of scripture was established by the Church; the Bible is the Church’s book and can only be interpreted according to her common mind in Christ.

This mystical reading of the two covenants: the Old looking forward to its fulfilment in the New; the New, finding itself prefigured in the Old, has also been received through Holy Tradition in the Church. We do not read the scriptures, looking for particular individual messages for ourselves, in that semi-magical approach followed by some, as if the Bible were some manual of divination, revealing secrets. Nor do we read it outside the boundaries of what is found in Orthodox doctrine and Theology. That is the perspective with which we come to the sacred text: not our own viewpoint, but with the mind of the Church, which is the mind of Christ. Thereby, collectively, as the body of Christ, we can rightly divide the Word of Truth, as we say, from the word of Falsehood. For many, straying beyond the bounds, have fallen into all kinds of heresies.

So today, we end the feast, and the throne, foreshadowed in David’s line, is exalted in the hymns of the Church. The Vespereal hymns of the feast speak of Mary’s falling asleep being glorified by dominions, powers, principalities, *and thrones*. If then the heavenly powers and thrones themselves give glory to *this* throne, then she must surely be above all thrones, dominions, and powers. In as much as the womb of the Theotokos held and nurtured Christ in the flesh, then she must be the throne of God himself.

In his visions, the prophet Isaiah saw that same throne glorified in the heavens. *‘In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:*

*“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”*

That vision of Isaiah is, of course, echoed in the great Anaphora, the prayer of offering over the bread and wine at the Liturgy. For when we stand in the Liturgy, here on earth, and hear the singing of the Thrice-Holy hymn, the chanters themselves represent the Cherubim, and we see reflected in images and symbols, the very worship of the Kingdom of God that Isaiah saw. For the holy table is many-faceted: at one time, the tomb of the resurrection; at another, seen as the cave where He is born; again, the hill of Calvary where the sacrifice is offered up; and once more today, seen as the throne, bearing the Christ in the consecrated *Lamb*, cut from the prosphora, and His blood in the holy chalice.

Today this mystical throne, once written about in veiled and obscure shadows and images in the Old Testament, is today fully revealed as glorified, and she is become for us the Mother of the Church. Laid once in an earthly tomb, passing away from this world, the apostles found that she was no longer here, in this world, not even in her bodily remains. But now, she has her honoured place, as is fitting and just, where else, but next to her son?

Meanwhile, you can seek Mary in the foreshadowing pages of the old covenant: you will find her in the Burning Bush, bearing the I AM in virginity but not consumed; in the Ark of the Covenant, bearing the Lawgiver Himself in the flesh, not the Law on tablets of stone; You will see her in the temple that Solomon built, full of the grace of the divine presence; and in the book of Daniel, the mountain from which the stone was cut out without hands.

Our feast, like all feasts, is not just for our joy, our instruction, our edification, but also for our reminding: that is, putting *us* back into

the mind of the church: re-*mind*ing; that we become, again and again, mindful of and immerse ourselves in, the mystery of Christ. For we must cling onto Christ and hold fast onto Him. For in the Church of Christ, there is no separation now for us between heaven and earth. If there be any division, if there be any separation, then the only schism, the only great chasm, is found in hell; that state of sin and alienation when we forget Our Lord. But here we are gathered in union with heaven's queen. Christ who ever lives to make intercession for us, is our offering, the redemption of our humanity, in whose image we are restored. But alongside Him lies His throne, set up in the heavens now: she who also ever lives, interceding alongside us and for us, as the Queen of saints and the mother of all Christians. For, although we rightly pray for ourselves and for each other in this ascetic struggle to reach the kingdom, there is no other who is closer to the Saviour's ear than she.

For centuries, Christians have known this. The earliest recorded hymn to Mary is known from an Egyptian papyrus written in Greek from around 250AD. It is a hymn that we still use at the end of weekday Vespers in Great Lent.

*Beneath your compassion,  
We take refuge, O Theotokos:  
do not despise our petitions in time of trouble:  
but rescue us from dangers,  
only pure, only blessed one.*