

**ST GEORGE'S MALVERN**  
**Feast of Mary Mother of the Lord – Dormition – Assumption**  
**8.00am 14 August 2011**  
**Bishop John Bayton AM**

My text for this morning is before you on an easel. It is an impression off an Eastern Orthodox Icon of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. The word 'dormition' comes from the Greek word meaning "sleep'. In Greek a dormitory is a cemetery. A dormouse sleeps through the winter. A dormer window signifies a bedroom behind. This is an Eastern Image. The 'Falling Asleep' of the Virgin Mary.

The Western Catholic Church celebrates the 'Assumption of the Virgin Mary' and teaches that she did not die, but that she was taken up into heaven.

In Jerusalem, on Mount Zion there is a beautiful Benedictine Church dedicated to the dormition. In the crypt below the main nave is a three dimensional image of the Virgin Sleeping. In this the Benedictines follow the Eastern tradition rather than the strict dogmatic teaching of Rome.

My painting shows the moment of her 'Falling Asleep'. It is said that when she knew her hour had come she summoned the apostles from the various parts of the world and they came to be with her. Just before she died she asked them to carry her body down to the Garden on Gethsemane and lay her in a tomb. This, according to the tradition they did. They bound her in grave clothes as the Jewish tradition required and laid her in a new-cut tomb. This happened on a Friday, Sabbath Eve. When they returned on the third day to pray for her soul – according to Jewish tradition the soul departed from the body on the fourth day [remember Lazarus ?] they found the tomb was empty. She had been 'assumed into heaven' so the angel told them.

Today in the Greek Orthodox monastery you may see her empty tomb.

There are of course many similarities to the burial-resurrection of her Divine son.

The beautiful church of the dormition has a marvelous history.

***Display second painting of the Dormition Abbey***

**SERMON ST GEORGE'S MALVERN**  
**Feast of the Dormition of the Virgin**  
**Bishop John Bayton AM**  
**August 14 2011 at 10.00am**

**“WHO IS JESUS”**

Texts

It was a cold, crisp Thursday morning. Seven o'clock. Having left the monastery at 200am I rode a camel up to Elijah's Plateau and then climbed the 700 steps- a thousand feet - to the summit of the mountain where God gave Torah – the 10 commandments and every interpretation of them to Moses. The descent from there was more strenuous than the ascent – a great metaphor for spiritual life. I was about to join the students for a breakfast of boiled egg, fig jam and Laughing Cow cheese on pita when one of the monks, brother Paul called out to me. “Come with me” and he took me into the Cathedral and led me down the aisle, past the sanctuary into a tiny chapel .”This is the chapel of the Burning Bush” built over the site of Constantines' mother Helena's original fourth century chapel. I took off my boots and entered the sacred space and knelt down before the tiny altar with its magnificent frescoed reredos. Very few people and then only priests may enter this place. This has been so for over sixteen hundred years.

The frescoed Icon shows the Virgin Mary as the Burning Bush. On her right hand side you find the great Orthodox liturgists - Saint James and Saint Basil. On her right hand is Liturgist Saint John Chrysostom and next to him, Moses. Above them all in the apex is the Icon of Christ shown delivering from his right hand the Divine Liturgy to the Fathers. In his left hand he is shown handing down the Torah to Moses. The first five commandments, Tablet One are about **Theology**; On Tablet Two the five Commandments are about **Ethics**.

This was a moment of extraordinary revelation to me for what is depicted in this Icon is the equality of Liturgy and Law . Both are of Divine Institution, therefore both are un-alterable.

The shape, the form of the Liturgy is forever to be equated with that which in the beginning was handed down by God himself.

As an aside I have a problem with a good deal of contemporary liturgy because I believe the language of religion is poetry. Kathleen Raine the great William Blake scholar says “When speaking the language of religion one must never speak in the language of the common people”.

Miracle must be conveyed in the language of poetry. Religious language is always a moment of disclosure. Remember this when you read your bible every day, for God chooses to reveal mysteries to us as we read and meditate on his word.

‘Burning’ is a great Bible word – Remember Abraham's vision of the burning incense passing through the staves of his sacramental covenant. Remember Isaiah at the Coronation service when the cherub placed a burning coal on his tongue? Remember Daniel's God revealed in the fiery furnace. Elijah's burnt offering in his battle with the priests of Baal. And “did not our hearts burn within us as he spoke to us on the way” – Mr and Mrs Cleopas on their way home to Emmaus.

And will our hearts burn within us today as we receive the Lord of Life into our own.

**Mary as the Burning Bush.** What an extraordinary theology - burning but not consumed. Eternally Virgin. This is a profound revelation. It is this theology of the Eastern and Orthodox Churches – Mary as the Burning bush.

Let us for a moment recount the narrative of Moses encounter with the Lord. The Egyptian Prince become Shepherd. *“Take off your shoes, for the place whereon you stand is holy ground”*. “Who are you Lord” . Later, in history this is the question of the Garden of Gethsemene – “Whom do you seek?” “Jesus of Nazareth”. “I AM He”. This is also the question asked by Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus. “Who are you Lord”. “I AM He”. . **“ Ehyeh asher ehyeh “ Yod Hey Wah Hey - YHWH – “This is my name forever”**.

**I Am what I Am.** *“I will be whatever I want to be”*. A baby in Bethlehem. The voice of sheer silence to Elijah. A piece of bread on the Altar. **I Am** – The bread of life. The Light of the Cosmos. The Door, The Good Shepherd. The true Vine. The Way, the Truth and the Life. The Resurrection. And finally, in the Garden “Whom do you seek?” “Jesus of Nazareth”. “I AM HE” Here the verb to be becomes the most important article in the entire literature of all peoples.

How can ‘I’ be ‘He’.? Before Abraham was, I AM.

The One whom she bears is the word of God Made Flesh. Jesus Christ is the Word from the burning bush, God Himself. YHWH. *Yod Hey Wah Hey* – a Breath – Spirit, Holy Spirit.

The Virgin Mary as the burning bush. That which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of the Holy God whose name is “I AM”. She carried within her the Word of God – I AM and brought Him to birth. She nurtured him, taught him.

In Jerusalem, just outside the walls of the Old City lies the Church of the Dormition of the Virgin. Here, when she knew that her hours on earth were accomplished, Mary called the Apostles from the many parts of the world – Thomas from India, Thaddaeus from Armenia, James from Spain, Philip from Ethiopia, Andrew from Greece, John from Ephesus and so on.

She tells them to carry her body down into the Garden of Gethsemene. She then ‘fell asleep’.

It is from this Greek word that we have today’s festival

Dormitory is the Gk word for ‘cemetery’. A door-mouse sleeps through winter. A dormer window indicates a bedroom.

The church celebrates two Festivals – One the Dormition, the Falling Asleep of the Virgin Mary on Mount Zion and two, ‘The Feast of the Assumption of the Virgin’ which took place according to the Tradition ‘on the third day ‘ in the Garden of Gethsemene.

Western Protestantism rejects both festivals . My problem about the Protestant denial is quite simple. All of us are in one way or another concerned with talismans, keepsakes, relics of our forebears. A lock of hair. A letter. *A memento mori.* *Eg my pectoral cross.*

The Church venerates relics of the saints – St Francis’ monastic habit. A lock of hair from St. Teresa. St James the Great’s foot. The body of St. Catherine of Alexandra in the Monastery on Mount Sinai. Saint Peters bones in the Vatican. And so on. Relics of Apostles saints and martyrs all over the world. But none of the Virgin Mary.

There may be here today some who have been to Ephesus in Turkey where it is said the Virgin Mary lived with Saint John the Beloved disciple. You will then say to me,” So she did not fall asleep in Jerusalem, but in Ephesus” . Where ? When? Does it really matter. Tradition holds that she was carried up to Heaven. Myth is more important than history. Ask yourself ‘What would God do to the Handmaid of the Lord, the one found most perfectly suited to hear the words *“The Holy Spirit will fall upon you”* ; she who bore Him into the world and reared the Word of God - YHWH; she who knew that his God Time (Kairos) had come at Cana in Galilee; She who stood with Him at the Cross; she who was present on the day the same Holy Spirit who had ‘come upon her’ anointed the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost.

It is the same Holy spirit who falls upon you today – the bishop’s mitre is a symbol of the cloven tongues of fire from the Day of Pentecost. You must know therefore that you are never alone in your pilgrim journey. The spirit of the Word Made flesh, the Word of God spoken from the Burning Bush will be your guide, your protector and your Saviour. For Christ is God, the YHWH of the Hebrew Scriptures revealed to us in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. “Whom do you seek” today ? “Jesus of Nazareth”. **I AM HE. “Who is Jesus?” – He is the voice from the Burning Bush - YHWH**