

Homily for the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2019

*Mary's prayers help us to say "yes."*

In a few weeks' time Blessed John Henry Newman will be declared a saint of the Church. Bishop Marcus will be at the Mass in Rome along with a number of other people from our Diocese. It will be an extraordinary moment in the new evangelisation of our country. The then Cardinal Newman preached a famous homily in the chapel of Oscott College, Birmingham announcing the Second Spring of Catholicism in England following the restoration of the hierarchy, in other words the reestablishment of dioceses in England and Wales in 1850. As well as being a great intellectual Blessed John Henry was a parish priest in the Birmingham Oratory. He knew from personal experience the challenges of building up and maintaining a Catholic parishes. He will be a powerful intercessor for us in the years ahead.

About ten years ago, I went on a tour of the Birmingham Oratory and we went into his library. It was an extraordinary room, full of big leather-bound volumes of the writings of the Fathers of the Church from the first centuries which his friend, Pusey (I think we were told) had managed to secure from France. Many of them had been sold after monasteries and other religious houses had been ransacked during the French Revolution. It was through these books that, Blessed John Henry, who was formerly an Anglican, discovered that the Church founded by Christ was indeed the Catholic Church.

One of the doctrines he explored was the role of Mary in God's plan of salvation. He discovered that many of the Fathers had described her as the Second Eve. Whereas the first Eve had disobeyed God, Mary obeyed God. "Let it be done to me according to your word," she told the Archangel Gabriel at the moment of the Annunciation. As a result, and only because she said "yes," mankind was, through the death and resurrection of the child whom she at that moment conceived, to be set free from the shadow of death which formerly had shut out joy from our lives. God, who is of course all-powerful, chose nevertheless not to save mankind except through the cooperation of a young woman in a remote northern province of Palestine.

This gives us pause for thought. Was God being reckless with our welfare? What if Mary had said "no"? Can he really love us if he, as it were, played with our salvation in this manner, wagering the prospect of success upon the

willingness of a teenager to overcome her natural fearfulness and accede to his request?

Our minds reel as we think of the cosmic consequences of what happened in that garden or that room in Nazareth all those years ago. It marked the beginning of the end of the Kingdom of Darkness. Hell quaked. One word from Mary – “Fiat” – “So be it” – ushered in the “end times” in which we rejoice to live as we look forward to the bright prospect of eternal life with the fruit of Mary’s womb, Jesus, and God the Father and God the Holy Spirit and Mary herself and all the other saints and angels. Mary made this future happiness possible – indeed let us be bold, likely – indeed let us be bolder still, certain, if we but receive that which God wishes to confer upon us.

And it is in considering the event in this way, I think, that we can see that God was not *playing* with our salvation. Rather he was showing us *how* we may be saved. Salvation is, in the words of Jesus in our gospel today, [Vigil] “...heari[ng] the word of God and keeping it.” Mary in pondering and saying “yes” models what it is to be a disciple of her Son. Only if we follow her example will we inherit the rich patrimony that God wishes the members of the new Israel, the Church, should enjoy. Salvation is not automatic. We have to say yes too!

If our saying “yes” is so crucial, it follows that God must be speaking to us as he spoke to Mary. And he is! The Holy Spirit is calling to us from the depths of our being urging us to be courageous and to put into action God’s will in our lives. Mary, though her knowledge was limited by the finiteness of her human understanding, knew that God’s mercy for humanity was reaching its culmination through her willing acceptance of her role in his divine plan. She rejoiced that God was accomplishing so much through her.

This same God wishes to accomplish much through us in this our generation. God wishes us to cooperate with him in confronting the Kingdom of Darkness which, though defeated, continues to seek to destroy humanity in whatever way it can, desperately, joylessly. We are called to become like Mary who treads upon the head of the malign serpent. She rejoiced “in God our Saviour” as we heard in our Gospel today [Mass of the day]. She who was assumed into heaven, shows us what it is to be an authentic human person, a person who is obedient to God, a person who devotes herself to serving others, a person who is resplendent with the glory of God.