

The Mass this morning was celebrated in honour of Mary, the Mother of God. This is no new thing: From the very first years of the early Church, the place of Mary was assured and was always held to be worthy of honour. Now, here she is, at the beginning of the new year. In a very real sense, it was almost inevitable.

Mary is there at the beginning and the end of Jesus' life and work. It is she who wonders at homage of the three Magi, she who is told that a sword will pierce her heart, she who ponders on the child Jesus' blossoming awareness of his mission, who witnesses – and actually prompts – his first miracle at Cana, and it is Mary who stands in silent anguish at the foot of the cross. Although references to Mary in the gospels are comparatively few, all of them are of deep significance.

Mary is the first disciple of Jesus and the mother of the Church as well as his mother, since she was there with the Apostles in the upper room at Pentecost.

Yet every Marian title, every honorific given to Mary is in fact a statement confirming the status, dignity and divinity of Jesus. They are *first and foremost* that. When Mary was

declared 'Theotokos' by the Council of Ephesus in AD431 – a title which means 'God-bearer' – it was primarily an affirmation that Jesus Christ was God in human form. Even earlier – as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, barely a couple of hundred years after Jesus died – the Church father Origen was already referring to Mary as 'ever-virgin' as if it was an established dogma; this was reflected in the icons of the Eastern Church, in which the three stars on representations of Mary mean perpetual virginity ✧before, ✧during and ✧after giving birth to Jesus. Yet this was also in the first place a reference to the unique status of the God-man she bore, rather than to herself. When Pius XII declared the Dogma of the Assumption on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1950, he was affirming that Mary was assumed into heaven *because* she was the Mother of Christ and that this was a fitting honour for her *as* the Mother of Christ.

Devotionally – or psychologically – Mary fulfils one of the deepest longings of the human psyche – which is for femininity and motherhood in our spiritual life. The young, almost unknown Jewish girl who gave birth to Jesus of Nazareth has become the Queen of Heaven; this transformation was almost

inevitable given the roots in Judaism which inspired it and made it possible. Although Jewish theology has always upheld a very powerfully masculine image of God, feminine aspects of the divine have been there from the beginning. The glory of God, for example, called his 'Shekinah' is feminine, both metaphysically and grammatically; God's glory is in exile in this world, waiting at the transformation of all things to be reunited with him in a kind of mystical marriage. Divine wisdom, too, is personified as feminine in the books of Wisdom literature in the Bible. The titles in the beautiful 'Litany of Loreto', with which I grew up – Mystical Rose, Tower of Ivory, House of Gold, Gate of Heaven, Morning Star – go far deeper than poetry or devotion, although they are certainly that too. They strike an absolutely fundamental chord in the human psyche: the need for the feminine in all its aspects in our common spirituality; because an authentic spirituality will always reflect our humanity – which includes mother as well as father, the feminine as well as the masculine. We can't cut one half off: spiritually we must be nourished by both. Famously, the English medieval mystic Julian of Norwich said that God is our Mother; and Jesus himself, is like a mother,

feeding us with himself in the Eucharist. And, lamenting over Jerusalem, he compared himself to a mother hen.

The vast difference between the young Jewish girl who gave birth to Jesus about two thousand years ago and the Queen of heaven she now is, wearing a halo of stars and attended by angels, does actually matter. The transition was an inevitability.

To understand this inevitability, we have to withdraw our exterior gaze to look within. That's what Mary herself did: Luke's gospel says: "Mary stored up all these things and pondered then in her heart".

Reading theologies of Mary, studying scriptural grammar or consulting theological lexicons of books of commentary or the geography of the ancient Near East won't do any good at all – nothing that the head can come up with – necessary though the head is – will ever touch the central mystery. This is a job for the heart.