

## Assumptions!

Isaiah 61<sup>10-end</sup>; Psalm 45<sup>10-end</sup>; Galatians 4<sup>4-7</sup>; Luke 1<sup>46-55</sup>

*My soul magnifies the Lord.  
[Luke 1<sup>46</sup>]*

Today the Church of England fudges things (as it is so good at doing). In the Roman Catholic Church this is the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary – the traditional belief that when her work on earth was done, she was bodily taken up to heaven.

Whilst this was a traditional belief in the Church (and shared by the Orthodox Church who celebrate the Dormition of the BVM on the 28<sup>th</sup> August) it only became a dogma (something that Roman Catholics have to believe) on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1950 when Pope Pious XII dogmatically stated that it was so.

This in itself was the only use of the Papal Infallibility, which was another tradition in the Church, but defined at the First Vatican Council on the 18<sup>th</sup> July 1870. In practice it means that the Pope, when speaking *ex cathedra*, cannot be wrong and what he says must be believed by all Roman Catholic Christians.

Today, whilst celebrating the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I thought that it might be an opportunity for us to remember why we are Anglican and not Roman Catholics (or anything else).

- ✘ The foundations of this Church go back to 900AD and so for the largest part of its life it was a Roman Catholic Church – until, of course, the Reformation. The Church of England is a gloriously embracing institution – embracing those whose practices would make St Peter's in Rome look like a Methodist Chapel to those who are so free in their form and style that it is difficult to know what precisely they are; and there is a breadth of belief that goes from Fundamentalism on the one hand to lunatic Liberalism on the other. That eccentricity and lack of insistence on uniformity, together with the Parish system, is the jewel in the crown of the CofE and is part of its joy.

- ✘ We believe in Bishops, but we don't believe in the Infallibility of any individual, or collection of individuals. It was Henry VIII that sacked the Pope and celebrated women: the CofE has done that ever since. However spiritual and good our Bishops may be, we know (as they should) that they are very fallible. Yet, they hold us together and exercise their authority in ordaining, confirming and sharing the 'cure of souls' with Incumbents through the licenses they have the power to grant. At its best, our Bishops inspire and teach us.
- ✘ We believe that authority isn't vested in one single person or Scripture but, with Hooker's insightful description, that authority comes from scripture, is informed by reason (the intellect and the experience of God) and also tradition (the practices and beliefs of the historical church). These are the safeguards that keep us faithful to Christ and who we are.
- ✘ We believe that, in the Eucharist, Christ is present and that, in receiving the bread and wine, we receive Jesus and that faithfully receiving Communion is a means of grace to us. The Roman Church is more prescriptive, insisting in the Doctrine of Transubstantiation, that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ. Receiving Christ in the bread and wine is an act of faith and one we take seriously.
- ✘ We honour the Virgin Mary as the one God chose to bear his Son, the Virgin Mother of God (in line with the teachings of the Early Church – the *θεοτοκοκος*), but we do not worship her. We also accept that she got on with life after Jesus was born and went on, with Joseph, to have other children.

It is best that we know what we believe and that we do not make assumptions. We respect what others believe (in other faiths as well as in different Christian traditions) – and defend their right to be wrong! The tradition in which we find ourselves can be an accident of our birth or it may have been a deliberate choice. Our faith is based on Christ, not the Church. The Church is the community of faith in which we struggle together to be more like Jesus and to make him known.