

## For the Assumption

For one born in the southern hemisphere, such as myself, the Assumption is experienced as a spring festival.

My text is from Alfred Lord Tennyson: *In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.*

Few people today read much poetry. I keep promising myself that I shall get down to John Donne, George Herbert, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Francis Thompson, and R S Thomas, to say nothing of slim volumes of their own work sent me by friends in Canada, but I never do.

However if we are Christian we can not evade Hebrew poetry, in translation. The Old Testament is full of it. Think how lovely the prophet Isaiah sounds, even in translation, even if Hebrew poetry is unlike English in that it neither rhymes nor scans. The New Testament is full of it. Our Lord is the last and the greatest of the prophets. He is also a poet. Think how lovely the Sermon on the Mount sounds, even if its teaching crushes us down with guilt.

One lengthy Hebrew poem is an erotic exchange of endearments between a lover and his lass, called the Song, or the Song of Songs, or the Song of Solomon. He to her: "Your eyes are like doves" (4,1). "Your lips are like a thread of scarlet" (4,3). "Your words are beautiful" (4,3). She to him: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" (1,2). "Your love is better than wine" (1,2).

Today we remember the death of an old lady. She came towards the end of her life. She grew bent. She stooped a little. She got wrinkled. And finally she died.

The astonishing thing is that at some of our services the readings for the Assumption may come from the Song. (Provisions differ in different lectionaries.) Such readings are not about death. They are about him and her when young and in love.

You see, Jesus is the Boy. And the church is the girl. Jesus really does love us. "Your eyes are like doves." "Your words are wonderful." And we ought to love Jesus. "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth."

The boy and the girl marry. Jesus is the Bridegroom. The church is His bride. The two become one flesh. Jesus shares with His church all that He has, all that He is. He gives us His life, His resurrection, His youth.

We grow old and grey. We die down into death. Not only our bodies but also our innermost selves. We are spotted and wrinkled with sin. But as we die, this tremendous young Lover stands by us. "My Beloved speaks and says to me, Get up my love, my fair one, and come away. Winter is past. Flowers appear and birds begin to sing. Get up my love and come away" (4,10 - 12). Jesus doesn't just whisper sweet nothings into our ear. He actually makes them happen. We do rise up and go with him. Tiredness, weakness, age and sin fall away. We are young and strong again, for He gives us His life, beauty, goodness. "My Beloved is mine and I am His ((2,16)." He makes us to be with Him for ever in Heaven, forgiven, full of grace, beautiful.

Now if this is true for you and me, there is one Christian for whom it must be specially true. His mum, His ma. If there is one person to rise up, to leave the winter of her life behind, to skip away into eternal spring (2,8), if there is one person to be Queen in heaven, it is the old lady Mary. All the glory which Jesus gives to all His church, He most assuredly gives to His dear mother.

This is why we can read from the Song at any Christian funeral. This is why we can read from the Song at Mary's death. "He brought me to His banqueting house and His banner over me is Love" (2,4).

Dom Gregory Dix of Nashdom, an erudite scholar, said in a sermon: "She is the Queen of all the Cinderellas in history. The humble peasant girl. The carpenter's wife brought to bed in a stable. The refugee in Egypt. The mother about whom ill natured neighbours said she was no better than she ought to have been - she was not spared that taunt. The widow who watched her Son die in agony. The silent old woman of the people whose life was over for all that mattered, praying in obscurity for twelve or twenty years after the Ascension - and then, the Queen of heaven.

*My beloved spake and said unto me,  
Rise up my love, my fair one, and come away.  
For lo the winter is past,  
The rain is over and gone,  
The flowers appear on the earth.  
The time of the singing of birds is come.  
The voice of the dove is heard in our land.  
The vines are in blossom and give forth fragrance.  
Arise my love, my fair one, and come away. (Song 2,10 - 14).*

+Robert Mercer CR