**The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

Revelation 11: 19a; 12: 1-6a, 10ab

Psalm 45

1 Corinthians 15: 20-27

Luke 1: 39-56

**Theme: Where is the Ark of the Covenant?**

 On November 1, 1950, Pope Pius XII solemnly defined Mary’s bodily Assumption into heaven as a dogma of faith in the following words, “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma: that the Immaculate Mother of God, the ever Virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed body and soul into heavenly glory.” The dogmas of her Immaculate Conception, Motherhood of God, and Perpetual Virginity are all contained in the subject of this definition.

Obviously, I am not going to talk about all of these dogmatic statements in one homily. Many people, perhaps some Catholics, think the Church “creates” doctrine when she dogmatically defines them. When the Church defines a dogma like the Immaculate Conception or the Assumption, she is using her Christ-given, infallible authority to theologically define a particular belief that has existed since the beginning of Christianity (i.e., Jesus, Trinity, and The Nicene Creed). As early as the second century, we find Christians expressing their belief in Mary’s bodily Assumption. Liturgical feasts celebrating her Assumption begin to appear by the sixth century. By the eighth century, belief in the Assumption was common among Christians.

A second misconception among many is that our Catholic Marian beliefs are not supported by the Bible. According to an ancient Christian saying: “the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New.” The Old Testament prepared the way for the New Testament. Persons and events in the Old Testament prefigured, foreshadowed, anticipated, and symbolized persons and events in the New Testament. The Old Testament persons and events are called “types” of the New Testament persons and events they prefigure.

There are three major Old Testament “types” defining who Mary is: Eve, the Ark of the Covenant, and the Queen Mother. Today’s first reading from the Book of Revelation mentions the Ark and “a woman clothed with the sun” and today’s gospel passage also relates in a profound way to the Ark. For that reason, I want to spend a few minutes discussing the relationship between the Blessed Mother and the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant was the holiest object in the Old Testament religion. It was sacred because it carried the stone tablets of the Law that God gave to Moses at Mount Sinai and eventually it held a golden bowl filled with the sacred Manna from heaven, and the miraculous staff of Aaron. In Exodus, Chapter 25, God gave meticulous instructions for the construction of the Ark. It had to be made of acacia wood because it was believed to be incorruptible, and plated inside and outside with pure gold. Even the poles used to carry the Ark were covered with pure gold. The Ark had to be kept free from all impurity and profanation. The Ark and the Tabernacle (“traveling temple” which housed the Ark) together are the place where the “glory cloud” will descend from heaven”. The glory cloud was the visible sign that God had come down to earth to be with his people and it was also the means by which God would lead his people through the wilderness to bring them to the Promised Land. “Whenever the cloud was taken up from over the Tabernacle, the people of Israel would go onward; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not go onward till the day it was taken up” (Ex 40: 21,33-38).

Once the Israelites arrived in the Promised Land of Canaan, the Ark of the Covenant was moved around quite a bit. Sometime around 1000 BC, King David decided to bring the Ark to the city of Jerusalem and give it a permanent home (2 Sam 6: 6-15). The bringing of the Ark to Jerusalem by King David is not for us one of the most familiar passages in the Bible, but for ancient Jews, the ascent of King David and the Ark to the mountain of Jerusalem was nothing less than the coming of God himself (2 Samuel 6). The event is memorialized in Psalm 132. Why? Because where the Ark goes, the presence of “the Lord” goes in the “glory cloud”! It is only after the priests bring the Ark of the Covenant into the Holy of Holies that the “cloud” from heaven once again comes down and fills the Temple (1 Kgs 8: 10-11).

Unfortunately, we know the “rest” of the story. The Babylonians destroy the Temple and the city of Jerusalem, and the “glory cloud” of God’s presence departed from Jerusalem (Ez 10), as did the Ark of the Covenant. Ancient Jewish tradition says the prophet Jeremiah took the Ark from Jerusalem and hid it in Mount Nebo (the mount from where God allowed Moses to see the Promised Land before he died), east of the Jordan River, shortly before the Temple was destroyed (2 Macc 2: 4-8). The text also reflects the ancient Jewish belief that one day “the lost Ark will appear.” According to 2 Maccabees, we will know where the Ark is when we see it overshadowed by the cloud of “the glory of the Lord.”

This tradition is significant because at the time of Jesus, the Jewish people were still waiting for the return of the lost Ark. First-century Jews knew full well that the current Jerusalem Temple was lacking two crucially important features; the glory cloud and the Ark of the Covenant (confirmed by the 1st century Jewish historian, Josephus). The Jewish people were not only waiting for a new Moses to come and deliver them. They were also waiting for the revelation of the location of the Ark and the return of the glory cloud of God’s presence.

A major reason this ancient Jewish hope for the return of the Ark is important is because, according to the New Testament, Jesus is not just the new Adam; He is also the new Moses, who has come to inaugurate a new “exodus.” The Exodus inaugurated by Jesus is also strikingly different from the Exodus from Egypt at the time of Moses. For Moses, the Exodus begins in the land of Egypt and ends in the Promised Land. According to the Gospel of Luke, however the Exodus of Jesus is different; it begins in Jerusalem (Lk 9: 30-31) and ends in heaven (Lk 24: 50-51). So, if Jesus is the new Moses, then where is the “new” Ark?

Perhaps we can glean some insight into that question in today’s Gospel reading.

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Note the parallels between Mary and the Ark? Are they just coincidences? From the earliest centuries, Christians saw the Old Testament Ark as a “type” of Mary. St. Ambrose wrote as follows: “The Ark contained the Tables of the Law; Mary contained in her womb the heir of the Testament. The Ark bore the Law; Mary bore the Gospel. The Ark made the voice of God heard; Mary gave us the very Word of God. The Ark shown forth with the purest of gold; Mary shown forth both inwardly and outwardly with the splendor of virginity. The gold which adorned the Ark came from the interior of the earth; the gold with which Mary shown forth came from the mines of heaven.” God took great pains to prepare and preserve the vessel that contained His written Word. How much more would He carefully preserve the New Testament Ark, which carried the even holier cargo of His Son, the living Word made Flesh?

In today’s first reading from the book of Revelation, we read of a vision in which John says, “God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” Immediately after seeing the Ark, John describes Mary – a reminder that Mary is the New Testament Ark. The Ark prefigured Mary’s body and soul, but it especially prefigured her ***body***. She carried the Living Word in her body. Mary’s body is in heaven.

The blessed Mother is one of us, a mere creature who was made of flesh and blood as we are. She differs from us in this, that because of her honored and most special relationship with God’s incarnate Son she received greater graces than any other human being, and she cooperated with these graces. If we cooperate with them each of us is guaranteed enough graces and favors to win our own resurrection to the eternal life.

Let us thank God first and foremost for sending his Son on earth for our salvation and to restore us as children of His Father. Then let us thank Him for choosing this human Mother – one of ourselves – and for giving her all the graces necessary for the position he gave her in life. She, like her beloved Son, wants us in heaven. She is able and willing to help us get there. All that is needed is trust and confidence on our part. Let us ask her today to be ever-watching over us to persevere in our loyalty to her divine son.