

Fifty-seven years ago I was staying in a small village in the Loire Valley with my French penfriend and his extended family. Various young relations told me that the following Thursday was a special holiday and that there would be a great celebration in the village – but we'd all have to go to church first. As a good little Anglican church choir member I was mystified. The only Thursday festival I'd come across was Ascension, and we'd had that already, so I asked what it was. 'Le can zoo', they replied, which left me no wiser. And when the day came, once we'd endured the rigours of Mass, it was indeed an excellent celebration, with a funfair in the village square, a day-long game of boules and much vin ordinaire for the older men, coffee and gâteaux for the ladies, ice cream for the kids, and the band of the sapeurs-pompiers playing away fit to bust (except when they stopped for another beer). There were fireworks in the evening, and as a special pièce de resistance the firemen's band finished their performance with a rousing attempt at what may have been 'God Save the Queen' to recognise the presence of la jeune Anglaise, as they hadn't had one of those in the village before.

But the can zoo itself remained a mystery for many years before it fell into place, finally seen written down, as 'le quinze août', August 15<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. It is of great significance in the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches, but was dropped from the Church of England prayer book in 1549 as too popish, so it wasn't surprising that I'd missed it. It didn't reappear until Common Worship arrived in 2000, and now we too celebrate the Blessed Virgin on August 15<sup>th</sup>. However, we have dropped the 'Assumption'. One Anglican theologian has called it the 'Unwarranted Assumption'; it is the belief that at her death Mary was carried up directly into heaven. There is no biblical basis for this, and no biblical basis for some of the other things people 'know' about Mary: that her parents were Joachim and Anne, for example, or that her mother taught her to read, or that Joseph was chosen from a range of other men to marry her because the dead stick he was given sprouted leaves while the other men's sticks stayed dead. All this, and the story of the Assumption, comes from manuscripts written at least four hundred years after Jesus died.

Where we do see Mary in the Bible, it is almost invariably in relation to her son. Luke's gospel gives us a particularly sensitive picture of her, as a young woman confronted with an extraordinary destiny, as a new mother fulfilling the expected religious rites, storing up and thinking about the things that are said about her child and, in a way every mother will recognise, being beside herself with worry when Jesus went missing from the group travelling back from Jerusalem, and scolding him out of sheer relief when he was eventually found back in the temple. John gives us two more glimpses, of Mary warning the servants at the wedding in Cana, and of the horror- and grief-stricken Mary at the foot of the cross. Then we are back with Luke, who places Mary in the Upper Room with the disciples after the Ascension. Then we lose sight of her altogether.

Over the centuries Mary has been held out as the ultimate example for all Christian women, with ever-increasing emphasis on her humility, her obedience, her subservience and, above all, her virginity. Indeed, it has been almost impossible for other women to be recognised as saints unless they have also been virgins, and many have become saints because of the extraordinary lengths to which they went to preserve their virginity. In that respect, Mary is an impossible role-model, and Christianity would have died out long ago if it had been followed. But she certainly didn't remain a virgin. We know that Jesus had brothers and sisters. I just can't see her as a meek, self-effacing figure in the background.

She must have had tremendous courage and determination alongside the obedience. She would have faced as much opprobrium as Joseph; when she was found to be expecting a child she would have disgraced both her family and her future husband. He could legitimately have abandoned her; she had no such rights. Her hymn of praise to God is a revolutionary manifesto in the mould of the Old Testament prophets. The proud will be scattered, the powerful deposed and the rich banished, while the hungry are fed and the downtrodden restored to dignity. God will do great things through her, and she will be a full partner in the enterprise. She followed this through, becoming a refugee in Egypt to escape Herod, returning to a different town away from her own family, bringing up her children in a normal household ('We know this man Jesus's mother and father, they're ordinary people', said the Sadducees, 'how can he say he's come down from heaven?') She watched her child die, the most agonising experience any mother can have, and she was probably in the Upper Room when the resurrected Jesus appeared to the disciples. She believed, she obeyed, she trusted and she endured. That takes guts and grit.

The can zoo celebrates an extraordinary woman – one who had a choice. God gives us all free will. We make our own decisions and must live by them. Mary could have said no to the archangel. That would have been the easy answer: 'No – I'm quite happy to go on as I am, thank you very much.' Instead she took the leap of faith, and the rest, as they say, is history. The history of Jesus Christ the Son of God, and of the strong, fearless, determined woman who was his mother: Mary Theotokos, the God-bearer.