

Today we are celebrating Mary's Assumption into heaven. The readings for today might strike us as a little strange though, especially the first reading. That reading speaks of King David bringing the ark to Jerusalem. Why does the church want us thinking about the ark of the covenant on a solemnity celebrating Mary? Perhaps a very short history lesson about the ark might help answer that question.

Where do we first see the ark in the Bible? In the book of Exodus. God gave Moses very specific directions on how to build it. What was the purpose of the ark? The short answer is that it would contain the presence of God as he led the people through the wilderness to the promised land. Fast forwarding a bit...David brings the ark to Jerusalem. His son Solomon builds a magnificent Temple and when the ark is brought into the Holy of Holies, the glory cloud which represents the presence of God descends and settles upon the ark. But then things fall apart. Davids' kingdom is split in two with the north being wiped out by the Assyrians and the south--which includes Jerusalem--falling into the Babylonian captivity. The Babylonians destroyed the Temple and Jerusalem...but what happened to the ark? The Second book of Maccabees tells us that the prophet Jeremiah removed the ark before the temple was destroyed and hid it in a cave in the mountain which Moses had climbed to see the promised land. When some people followed Jeremiah to mark the hiding place, he told them that the ark would remain hidden and lost until God's people were united and he showed them his mercy. This sounds like a good setting in which to tell the story of an archeologist racing the Nazi's to find the ark and the holy grail, but actually the return of the ark is a much greater story than anything Hollywood could ever dream up.

The readings for today focus on the ark, because the ark is no longer a thing...it has become a person. The ark contained the presence of God. In the New Testament, where do we first find the presence of God in the flesh? In the womb of Mary. Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant. The church wants us to see this connection. The first reading from the vigil Mass shows us David leading a procession of musicians as the ark is carried into Jerusalem. Although it was left out of that reading, the Bible tells us that David leapt and danced before the presence of the Lord in the ark. Who else leapt in the presence of the Lord? In today's gospel, John the Baptist leapt at the sound of Mary's voice, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, understood that her cousin was carrying the presence of

God in her womb. I could go on for a long time about other connections between Mary and the Ark...but on the feast of the Assumption, why does this connection matter?

The theologian Brant Pitre says that the revelation of Mary as the new ark is essential for understanding the belief in her bodily assumption into heaven. He wrote, "If Mary is the new Ark of the Covenant, then it makes sense that Jesus, the new David, would bring her up into heaven to be with him forever in the heavenly Temple." The rightful place of the old ark was the Temple that David's son Solomon built. The rightful place for the new ark of the covenant is the heavenly temple not built by human hands. Mary belongs in heaven with her son and Lord.

There is a practical application of the Assumption. Mary carried Jesus in her womb to Elizabeth in the hill country of Judah. She was the first evangelist of the gospel. We heard about the joy with which both John the Baptist and his mother received the presence of Christ. Now...what happens when we receive Holy Communion? We receive the body and blood of Christ and carry it within us; Jesus becomes part of us. If the old ark carried the presence of God into the promised land...if Mary, the new ark, carried Jesus who is both true God and true man to the hill country of Judah and beyond...what do we become when we receive the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist? We become living arks as well. When we receive the body of Christ, it is our duty to carry him out to the world.

When he wrote about the Dormition--or falling asleep--of Mary, Saint John Damascene said: "Today the holy, incomparable virgin enters the heavenly sanctuary that lies above the universe...Today the holy, living ark of the living God, the one who carried her own maker within herself, comes to her rest in the temple of the Lord not made by hands. David--her ancestor and God's--leaps for joy; the angels join in the dance."

May we also become true arks, carrying within us the joy of the gospel wherever we go so that David and the angels and all the saints might leap for joy when we come to rest in that same temple not made by human hands.