



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for the Feast of the Dormition of the BVM (15th August) 2026

When I establish the slot for streaming a Liturgy, I occasionally take advantage of the facility for providing a description of the service. This I did for today's Mass, because the word *Dormition* is a little bespoke and a bit of explanation might be helpful.

I quickly typed in that today we celebrate the death of Mary and her entry into Heaven. Then I paused and wondered whether it was quite right that we celebrated Mary's death; so, I think, now we remember the death and celebrate her entry into Heaven.

There was, of course, a gap between the day of Mary's death and the developed conviction that at that moment she was received into Heaven. Towards the end of the fifteenth century, the Flemish Artist Hugo van der Goes depicted Mary's deathbed surrounded by the Twelve Apostles all of whom are looking pretty miserable. This image is derived from a passage in one of the Apocryphal Gospels, which, whilst having no authority, does indicate at the time of its writing, Mary's death was viewed with sadness.

Tradition tells us that she moved to a house in Ephesus, which means that she was sufficiently far from Jerusalem not be involved in the day-to-day life of the Church. Perhaps, as for a once prominent figure, who has for some years retired from public life, the news of her death will have been received in Jerusalem with a touch of what we might term detached sadness.

Equally, there will have been a number of people who were, if not her children, very close to such a relationship with her - not least James - often somewhat tendentiously as the first Bishop of Jerusalem. Furthermore, of course, there is the detail in Saint John's Gospel, which I growl every Good Friday: that Mary was entrusted to Saint John's keeping and protection - standing in the place of her Son. This might allude to a person or group of people, who took on a particular care for Jesus' Mother.

For these people along with other family and friends, the sadness will have been more visceral. We have no evidence that in those early years people assumed that she will have immediately been received into Heaven - a clever bit of wordplay there.

However, in the decades, which followed an exercise in inductive reasoning, which can probably be summarised by the statement that, "Surely, of all people, Mary is in Heaven;" but which will have drawn on a number of theological strands. Over time, it became commonly held amongst Christians that this was, indeed the case. This agreement was what we call in the trade the *sensus fidelium* - the broad consensus. The *sensus fidelium* is reached under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and when it is formally articulated by the competent ecclesiastical authority is incorporated into the body of revealed Truth.

In some parts of the Church, there is a further belief that Mary not only went to Heaven at the moment of her death, but that her body as assumed thither. This is not a doctrine, which has achieved agreement throughout the branches of the Church Catholic: for Anglicans, it is not considered part of revealed Truth - not presently, anyway; but this does not constitute a denial of the belief.

This process of development in the belief about Mary's death reflects the method and manner in which many of the doctrines, which we consider foundational to Christian identity, emerged. The same Holy Spirit by Whom Jesus was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, continues to guide the Church into all Truth - as we read in Saint John's Gospel.