

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Weddings and funerals stereotypically represent the best of life's happiness and the worst of life's sorrow. There are exceptions, of course, but a wedding day opens onto a bright future of joy, whereas a funeral opens onto a future of loss.

Today's solemnity blends these two themes into one, joy completely absorbing sorrow. The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary commemorates the day on which Mary left this world. But singing Psalm 45 as our responsorial treats this observance not like a funeral, but like a wedding.

Psalm 45 was composed to honor an engaged couple. The groom is a king, handsome and eloquent. He rides a horse and sports a sword with which he triumphs in the cause of truth, meekness and justice. He wears beautiful and fragrant garments, music fills the richly decorated hall, and his mother, a queen, stands at his right side wearing gold from the mines of Ophir favored by Solomon.

The bride is a beautiful princess. She receives gifts from the land's richest people. Gold threads through her robes. The bridal party escorts her into the palace and to the king, amid gladness and joy.

The poet laureate of Psalm 45 promises that the king will have sons to rule as future kings, and that these lyrics will make the king's name remembered for ever. The irony is we don't know the name of this king.

Of all 150 psalms, this one is probably the most secular. It has almost nothing to do with God, everything to do with a royal wedding. But Catholics sing it on the solemnity of the Assumption because the bride in this poem foreshadows Mary. She was chosen to be the bride of the Holy Spirit, the mother of God, and our queen reigning on high. As the bride of Psalm 45 passes within the palace of the king, so we imagine Mary in her assumption passing within the palace of Christ the King. There, arrayed in the gold of the sun, she stands at the right side of God.

When Mary's life ended, surely her friends shed tears. But today the church remembers her passing not with a sorrowful funeral, but with a wedding psalm. Mary was assumed body and soul into heaven where she enjoys all the happiness of those who participate in a nuptial banquet.

Each of us approaches the prospect of our death in different ways, but many of us fear both how we will die and what happens after we do. Today's celebration aims to comfort us that just as Mary was brought to heaven, so we may experience similar joy some day. The church is so confident about this that on the day we commemorate the end of Mary's life we do not sing a dirge. We sing a love song from a royal wedding.