

THE ASSUMPTION OF THE BVM – YEAR C (2025)

Even if you weren't born at the time of its release (1981), I'm sure that many of you will have seen the film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, starring Harrison Ford. Set in the 1930s, it imagined the struggle between the archaeologist Indiana Jones and a group of Nazi agents, who were vying to be the first to locate the lost Ark of the Covenant, which they believed still had the power to make the army that bore it invincible, as it had done in the Old Testament. The culmination of the film is the finding of the Ark in Egypt; which, upon being opened by the Nazi agents, issues forth spirits, flames and bolts of energy that kill the Nazis, before sealing itself shut. Recognising both the potential and the danger of possessing the Ark, and that it would clearly be better off in the hands of the Americans than anyone else, Indiana Jones takes it back to Washington DC, where it is boxed up in a crate, and placed in a secure and secret location, where it remains to this day – or not. Never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

So, what has all of that got to do with the Feast we are celebrating today, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary? Well, as with every good story, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* contains some elements of truth; and provides us with a starting point for thinking about what did actually happen to the Ark of the Covenant of the Old Testament, and what its significance might be for Christian theology today. For, when we read the Bible, we don't read either the Old or New Testaments in isolation: the Old must inform the New, and the New interprets

the Old. And so, when Christians read the Jewish Scriptures – which form the larger part of our own sacred text – we discern in them what we call *types* – individuals who, and theological concepts that, foreshadow the ultimate divine revelation, which has been made manifest to both Jew and Gentile alike in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God.

And this is true of the Ark of the Covenant: constructed under divine orders by the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, it formed God's dwelling-place on earth, containing the cloud of his glory, along with the tablets of the Ten Commandments, a golden bowl of the manna that fed the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land, and the miraculous high-priestly rod of Aaron. Made of incorruptible wood, and overlayed with gold, the presence of the Ark gave the Israelites victory in battle; and brought them, at length, to the Promised Land. And what happened to it then? Well, to cut a very long story short, and after many vicissitudes, it was placed in King Solomon's Temple in the Holy of Holies – the *locus* of God's dwelling on earth, amidst his chosen people.

And there it remained, but not for long; for Solomon's Temple was destroyed, and the Ark and its contents disappeared. Apocryphal literature suggests that the prophet Jeremiah removed the Ark from the Temple, and hid it on Mount Nebo; though, of course, it has never been found. But what matters for us is that, in first century Judaism, the Holy of Holies in the Second Temple was completely empty – the Ark, and God's presence, were gone. Or were they?

In S. Luke's account of the Annunciation, which immediately precedes our Gospel reading today, we are told that, upon giving her consent to God's will for her life and our salvation, the Holy Spirit and the Power of God Most High 'overshadowed' Our Lady, bringing about the conception of her fully divine and fully human Son. The Greek word for 'overshadow', *episkiazo*, is the same word that is used to describe God's glory entering the Ark of the Covenant in Greek versions of the Old Testament. And so, it's not difficult to see why Christians see in this *type* a foreshadowing of Mary's conception of Jesus. Just as the first Ark of the Covenant had contained God's presence by means of the glory cloud; so Our Lady became the earthly dwelling-place of God incarnate. And, just as the Ark of the Covenant contained the Mosaic Law, the manna, and the priestly rod of Aaron, so Mary carried in her womb the new Moses and Great High Priest, who feeds his people perpetually with the Bread of Life.

Mary, then, is truly the *theotokos*, the God-bearer: she gives human life to God's only-begotten Son, who is himself the fulfilment of the Law and the Prophets. It is in him that all types and shadows have their ending; and it is by her that the first Ark of the Covenant is rendered superfluous. For it is she who carried not material symbols of God's presence and power, but the very person of God himself, the Second Person of the Trinity, and Saviour of the world. And, if you want to know where the true Ark of the Covenant is now, then look no further than to the words of S. John, from our first reading from the book of Revelation:

‘God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple’. The Ark is in heaven, because Mary is in heaven; and it is her being taken up into heaven that we celebrate today.

Because the Assumption of Our Lady is not only her reward and privilege for her unique role in human salvation; rather, it is also the consequence of Jesus’ death and Resurrection for all who put their faith and hope in him. As S. Paul says in our second reading, ‘For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order.’ And this is why we can say with confidence that God would not allow the vessel that had carried his Son to endure the corruption of the grave: Our Lady was certainly not the first Christian to die – think of the protomartyr, S. Stephen; but, she was assumed into heaven so that she might share in her Son’s glory, and so that her body, the true Ark, might forever dwell incorruptible in the heavenly Holy of Holies.

And so, Mary’s Assumption is both a pattern, and the fulfilment of a promise: the heaven in which she now dwells is our destiny; just as *bodily* Resurrection is for us too. But Our Lady, however highly exalted, is no lost Ark, whom we must go far to seek: she, the Mother of Jesus, is our Mother as well, whose powerful intercession and maternal care are only a prayer away. So, ask for her prayers, and put your trust in Jesus; and rejoice and hope that, because of them both, we will one day come to share the glory of God and of his Ark – not at an undisclosed location in America, but in our true home in heaven. Amen.