

Solemnity of the Assumption of the B.V.M. – August 15, 2018 – Fr. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.  
Cathedral of St Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5:30pm vigil & 6:30am feast day Masses – 1,000 words

The Ark of the Covenant, spoken of in the first reading, was the bearer of God’s presence to his people, Israel. The Ark was carried into battle with them; for quite some time, it held the tablets of the Law; for some time also, it contained a golden vessel filled with the manna given by God in the desert. Eventually, through the prudent planning of King David and the carrying-out of those plans by his son, King Solomon, it was brought into a fixed and glorious dwelling place: the great temple of Jerusalem, where it was enshrined in the Holy of Holies – the inner sanctum. But later, about six centuries before Christ, the Ark disappeared, as the Jews were carried off into captivity. We read in the second book of Maccabees that the prophet Jeremiah had it hidden, decreeing that “the place [where it is hidden] shall remain unknown until God gathers his people together again and shows his mercy”.

That prophecy of Jeremiah was one of expectation: God would again reveal himself through the Ark of the Covenant. And we see how that prophecy is fulfilled most richly in our Lord Jesus Christ. Relating to the tablets of the Law that the original Ark contained, Christ comes to us reasserting that same, never-changing moral law; more than that, he also embodies it, living it out perfectly and bidding us imitate him. Relating to the golden vessel filled with manna in the original Ark, Christ gives his very self to us: the true “bread from heaven” in the Holy Eucharist; and that gift remains in our midst, in our tabernacles. In these and other ways we can see that Jesus is the perfect New Testament fulfillment of the ancient Ark of the Covenant. In Christ, the secrets of God are revealed and “God gathers his people together again”, as the prophet Jeremiah said – and “shows his mercy”.<sup>1</sup>

We might ask what this has to do with the Assumption of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary – the solemnity we celebrate today. Why did the Church choose readings that mention the Ark for this feast? The answer may be found in reflecting upon the fact that our Blessed Mother was the first and most perfect disciple of her Son: totally transformed by his grace, she became, as it were, a perfect reflection of him. So it is that the Church has long recognized that the New Testament fulfillment of ancient prophecies often applies in a double way: to Christ, first – but also to his holy Mother. And for those who have prayed the Litany of Loreto – perhaps at the end of the Rosary, as is very traditional – you remember that one of the titles given to Our Lady is precisely, “Ark of the Covenant”. How, then, does Mary reveal to us the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy?

The answer is found in how her life paralleled what we might call the “ancient journey of the Ark”. When Moses had the Ark of the Covenant constructed according to God’s design and set it in its place as God commanded, a cloud of God’s glory descended upon it, signifying that God was pleased and that he now dwelt there in a special way. In the New Testament, at the Annunciation, we see the Holy Spirit descending upon the Blessed Virgin Mary and him then dwelling in her in a singular way also. In the Old Testament, we hear King David asking, “How is it that the Ark of the Lord should come to me?”; in the New, we hear Elizabeth asking of Mary, “And how is that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” Then, just as David brought the Ark of God into the Holy City amidst great jubilation, so also Elizabeth cries out with great joy when Mary arrives, “Blessed are you among women! And blessed is the fruit of your womb!”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See 2 Maccabees 2:4-8. For more on the Ark of the Covenant, the relevant *Old Catholic Encyclopedia* entry is quite helpful: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/01721a.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> This article is a helpful compendium of the parallels between the Ark and the Blessed Virgin Mary: <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/darmstrong/amazing-parallels-between-mary-and-the-ark-of-the-covenant>.

We could also consider how the Ark was carried into battle so many times as an assurance of victory; and how our Blessed Mother promises to obtain victory for us also, when we faithfully invoke her in our distress. And finally, there is the witness of scripture itself, in the Book of Revelation: there, our Blessed Mother, in heaven body and soul, is revealed as the Ark of God: “God's temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” In these and other ways, from the early days of the Church – the time of the Church Fathers – it has been our belief that our Blessed Mother is in her own way a fulfillment of the ancient Ark of the Covenant, bringing God’s presence into our midst and assuring his help in our necessities.

On this Solemnity of the Assumption we recognize that just as our Blessed Mother was saved in anticipation by God, being preserved free from all stain of sin from the first moment of her existence, so also her body was taken up into heaven in anticipation, the first fruits of the human race. Remember what I said about how the Lord Jesus perfectly fulfilled the moral law and modeled that for us: in the special privileges and gifts that he gave to the Blessed Virgin Mary, his mother and ours, we see a total fulfillment of the fourth commandment: “Honor thy father and thy mother”. She is, by God’s grace, our mother also, and we thus honor her today by being here at this Mass and offering our thanks to God the Father through Christ. May the fruit of our celebration today be an ever-greater love for her, so that we may honor her more fully each day; and may she thereby help us to honor our Father in heaven now, each day, and at the hour of our death. Amen.