

10am Patronal Festival Eucharist Sunday 8th September 2024

Isaiah 61:10-end, Gal 4:4-7, Luke 1:46-55

By the power of your Spirit, may what we have read and heard from your Word, and what I say, be at work in our hearts to draw us closer to you.

In 1998, in *Mother of all Myths*, the author Aminatta Forna wrote:

“nobody ever paints Mary [the mother of Jesus, looking] testy or tired, or trying to prepare baby Jesus’ food with one hand while jiggling him on her hip with the other. ... No-one has ever painted Mary going about the mundane tasks of motherhood ... [No] the Madonna and Child are frozen in eternity in a maternal idyll ... [that] many mothers experience relatively infrequently”.

Of course, the idealised picture of motherhood in every Renaissance portrait of Mary [and even in our own banner of Mary and the baby Jesus] wouldn’t correlate to the reality of Mary’s experience. But the fact that that image of Mary has become so universal does highlight the importance of Mary’s role in the traditions of the Church.

Proof of Mary’s importance is in the number of churches, like our own, named after Mary.

In 2016 somebody worked out which saint had most churches in the Church of England named after them, produced a league table, and put it on a website.

You probably won’t be surprised to hear that Mary has quite a clear lead, with over 14% of churches named after her.

(If you’re interested, in second place you have “All Saints” (which, personally, I think is cheating), then St Peter, and then, pretty much tied, but lagging quite a bit behind, our own St Andrew and St Michael.)

Today, the day of our Patronal Festival, is the perfect day for us to recall what we know about Mary from the Bible.

And as we examine her calling as the mother of Jesus, to understand more about how God calls *us* to serve his purposes. And what God’s calling means, for ourselves as individuals, and for the church of Great St Mary’s.

So, let’s look first at what we know about Mary.

Mary is betrothed, but not yet married, to Joseph when the angel Gabriel comes to announce to her that she is to bear the Son of God.

Mary, **very much perplexed, ponders what [this means].**

And because Mary is not naïve, or stupid, she comes straight back with the obvious question: **“how can this be, since I am a virgin?”**

When Gabriel says this will be by the power of the Holy Spirit, Mary immediately responds with **“Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word”**.

Mary trusts in God.

Mary has courage. Whilst pregnant, she journeys 80 miles or so from Nazareth to the Judean hill country to meet her cousin Elizabeth, long thought too old to have children, but now herself pregnant with the baby who would grow up to become John the Baptist.

Elizabeth, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, tells Mary that it is Mary’s faith that makes her **blessed among women**, because Mary has **believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her by the Lord**. And Mary replies with the amazing song of praise that we heard in our gospel reading, which tells us so much about how Mary herself sees her calling.

Mary’s recognition of her calling is grounded in her faith in God.

Mary is always thoughtful. When 12-year-old Jesus disappears on the family’s Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and is discovered in the Temple, 3 days later, **sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions**, and then is (not surprisingly!) told off by Mary for giving his parents such a scare, his answer - **“Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?”**- becomes yet another thing that causes Mary to **treasure all these words and ponder them in her heart**.

Mary is tenacious. At the wedding in Cana when the wine has run out, it is Mary who urges Jesus to do something, persisting even when Jesus is initially reluctant, and confidently saying to the servants **“Do whatever he tells you”**.

And Mary is resilient. At the end of Jesus’ life on earth, Mary is there, with the other women, at the foot of the cross. Mary is there with those first early believers, who’ve returned to Jerusalem and are **“constantly devoting themselves to prayer”** when Peter stands up to urge them to choose somebody to replace Judas Iscariot.

You know those School Yearbooks?

With photographs of everybody who left school that year as you, each one with a description underneath: **“most likely to win a nobel prize”**, or **“most likely to become Prime Minister”**, or **“most likely to win an Olympic medal”**?

When Mary and the other local girls came to the end of their formal education at the local synagogue they didn't have a Yearbook.

Even if they had, nobody would have predicted Mary's role as mother of the Saviour revealed by the Hebrew Scriptures, come to redeem his people from suffering and oppression.

But Mary trusts in the God whose character and purposes she knows from the Hebrew Scriptures.

God's calling is grounded in faith in God.

When we hear and read the Bible and find it challenging, it is good to remember that Mary wasn't afraid to ask questions.

Good to recall that Mary paid attention to God's words for her, pondering upon them and turning them over in her mind.

Looking to what she knew about God from the Scriptures to understand the part she could play in God's plan.

God's calling is shaped by faith in God's character and purposes, and in our understanding of how we relate to God.

Mary could say, in her wonderful song of praise, ***my Spirit rejoices in God my Saviour*** because Mary understood the nature of God.

God who is holy and merciful.

Strong, generous and faithful.

Mary knew God as the one who redeems us, confident he is the one who will ***[scatter] the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, [bring down] the powerful from their thrones, [lift] up the lowly, [fill] the hungry with good things, and [send] the rich away empty.***

Turning the certainties of the world upside down by sending his own Son to die on a cross in the company of criminals.

Bringing in the kingdom of God for those who will turn to him and will accept him as their Lord.

Our most important calling is to be a child of God.

To remember, in the words of Paul to the Galatians, that **God sent his Son to be born of a woman ... [so that] we might receive adoption as [his] children.** That **God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts,** so that we might cry out to him as our Father, **no longer a slave but a child,** and heir to all the promises of God.

God's promises are the key to understanding God's character and purposes for us, as individuals and as the church here at Great St Mary's.

If we understand God's promises then, like Isaiah, we can say **my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, [and] he has covered me with the robe of righteousness.**

Not our own righteousness, but the righteousness bestowed on us through Jesus' death and resurrection.

God's character and purposes are embodied for us in the life and death and resurrection of Christ.

We bring to God, for the work of his church here, not just our money, but also our time and our talents.

Talents that might be creative or musical. Or talents expressed in teaching, or in sharing hospitality, or in empathising with and caring for others, or in countless other important ways that build up our community and our faith in God.

For it is only through our understanding of God's character and his purposes – of everything that we celebrate as we come to the Lord's Table - that we truly come together as the body of Christ, living out our calling as God's people, at this time and in this place.

Amen.