

The Blessed Virgin Mary

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Almighty God,
who looked upon the lowliness of the Blessed Virgin Mary
and chose her to be the mother of your only Son:
grant that we who are redeemed by his blood,
may share with her in the glory of your eternal kingdom,

Our text today may be found in Luke chapter 1 and verse 46 and is the familiar opening lines of the Magnificat: 'And Mary said,

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour
for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant'

Today, we celebrate the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There are six days in the Christian calendar dedicated to her. Three have their roots in scripture. Three have their roots in the traditions of the Church. The three rooted in scripture fall on 2nd February, 25th March; and 31st May. They are the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple; the Annunciation to Mary; and the visit of Mary to her cousin, Elizabeth. The three rooted in tradition fall on 15th August; 8th September; and the 8th December. They are her Assumption; her Birth; and her Conception.

Christians differ in the status we accord Mary, the mother of Jesus, the God-bearer, ranging from one extreme where Mary is seen as the Queen of Heaven, the

Co-redemptrix to another where she is simply regarded an ordinary woman who accepted God's plan for her to be the mother of his Son. Whatever your personal view, surely it should be informed by respect, for if we are to honour our parents as the Fifth Commandment enjoins us to do, then surely the mother of our Lord is worthy of our respect ?

In the calendar of the Christian Church, 8th September is the birth of Mary and I'd like this morning to reflect briefly on how Mary is regarded in the three Virgin festivals that are rooted in tradition.

Today then is her birth. It is an obvious and necessary fact that we all acknowledge that for any of us to exist in this world, first we have to be born. Mary is no exception to this rule. According to tradition, her father was Joachim, her mother Ann, a saint who is particularly honoured here in Brittany. Incarnation, to be embodied, to be flesh and blood, is a key part of what it is to be human and through the Incarnation, Jesus himself was fully what it is to be human.

Last month, on 15th August, we marked Mary's assumption into heaven. Assumption is not something we assume but rather the root of the Latin word, 'assumere', means to take up i.e. God drawing up the Virgin to be with him in heaven. In the Orthodox tradition, the word used is Dormition – a beautiful word which means falling asleep and as such is a peaceful image to describe her death, a good death, confident of the life of the world to come. But in Catholic tradition, the idea is that on her death, Mary is taken straight up to heaven to be with her Son without having first to wait for the general resurrection like the rest of us. If

you like, it is like a spiritual priority boarding pass that puts Mary unequivocally at the front of the queue !

And so we come to 8th December, the feast of the Immaculate Conception, which Anglicans celebrate as the Conception of Mary. And there we have an interesting distinction. Mary, was she sinless even before she was born ? From the moment she was conceived, was the virgin pure, free from original sin which taints us all, or was she completely human like we necessarily all are if we are to be truly human ?

You must make up your own mind on this controversial doctrine, a dogma of the Catholic Church only formulated in the second half of the nineteenth century. But let me share with you how I make sense of the purity of the Virgin Mary. For me, her state of grace comes from her humility and from her obedience. She was a girl who said yes to God. She was prepared to accept God's will for her. She was prepared to conceive God's child even though she had never known a man in a sexual sense. Now according to Judaism, Man cannot encounter God directly because God is pure and we are not. Even for the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies in the Temple at Jerusalem, he had to undertake rigorous ritual purifications. In the Levitical code, there are clear instructions on what to do when and in what circumstances in order to render ourselves sufficiently clean to stand in the assembly of the righteous in the presence (albeit at a remove) of God. We see it in the old tradition of fasting before communion and in the notion of coming clean and smart to church. Cleanliness is, after all, next to Godliness.

So I can see why the Pope should have declared Mary to be immaculate; that even in the Ann's womb, Mary was sinless, pure from the spot of sin. But I think the idea that we pollute God by being human and therefore necessarily sinful is a misconception. Rather, I believe that it is the presence of God, communion with him, that purifies us. If Jesus, the Son of God, was conceived in Mary's womb and grew therein from a zygote to a foetus to emerge in due time as a baby boy, then I believe that Mary was purified by his presence, and that her purity was a consequence of, not a precondition for, Jesus' presence in her womb.

So there you have it. Mary was born and Mary died like all we must. And we can debate whether or not she went straight to heaven. And we can also argue whether or not her conception was immaculate. But whatever we think of Mary, let us be united in the respect we accord Theotokos, the God bearer, the Blessed Virgin Mary, Jesus' mum.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,
Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

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G: Sermons 28 : BVM

