

The Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Isaiah 61: 10 – end; Luke 1: 46 – 55

Today we celebrate the Festival of the Blessed Virgin Mary. And it's very appropriate that we do so, not least because – as I said in the notices – this church is in fact dedicated to St Mary. We tend to overlook that, even though we always write “Priory Church of St Mary Bridlington” at the top of our service sheets and at the top of the notice sheet. I suspect there are a number of reasons for this.

The first is simply a matter of fact: we never refer to this church as St Mary's. We simply call it the Priory. If you told somebody that you'd been to St Mary's Bridlington this morning, they probably wouldn't know what you mean. This is Bridlington Priory, full stop.

Another reason may be, if we're honest, because we're a bit prejudiced against the cult of devotion to the

Blessed Virgin Mary; and I suspect that the term “Our Lady” does not trip readily off many of our tongues. The tradition of the Priory is Low Church. It may be formal, but it's Low Church. The spectrum between informal and formal is completely different to the spectrum between Low Church and High Church. And however formal or dignified or stately the Priory may be, it shouldn't ever be described as High Church. And, of course, there are people here today who come from backgrounds much more entrenchedly protestant than Low Church Anglicanism.

And it may be that, for some of us, our prejudice against celebrating Mary is a suspicion that there's a whiff of idolatry about it all. Of course, if that is the case, our prejudice needs to be challenged. Nobody, no matter how far up the candle they may be, ever sets out to worship Mary. Nobody ever sets out to pray *to* Mary: they simply petition Mary to pray *for* them. We wouldn't quibble about asking a friend to hold us in their prayers if we needed it. And if we believe – as we

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profess to believe every week when we recite the Creed – that we believe in the life everlasting through Jesus Christ, then there is no reason to quibble at asking someone who has gone before us to hold us in their prayer. And what better person to ask than the mother of God herself?

The problem, though, is that this is all a bit cerebral: it's head knowledge. And I suspect that to many of us Protties at the Priory, our visceral reaction – our gut reaction – is to be suspicious of what's alien to us. And because we just don't address petitions to Mary at the Priory, this is all a bit alien to us, so we're suspicious of it: the whiff lingers.

Perhaps the strongest reason to be reluctant to celebrate Mary, though, is the association of Mary with meek obedience. Meek obedience is to be resisted. Oscar Wilde said "Disobedience is . . . man's original virtue." I should warn you that John Mack lent me the most wonderful book by Oscar Wilde over the

summer.¹ It took me ages to read it because I was writing out quote after quote into my commonplace book, so you might be hearing a lot of Oscar Wilde in the coming months. But how about this? "Disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue. It is through disobedience that progress has been made, through disobedience and rebellion." How's about that? Isn't that magnificent? The point is that we don't want people to be obedient at the expense of their self-esteem. We don't want people to be obedient if it means they can't think for themselves, and speak up for themselves and assert themselves.

And here the cult of Mary has some answering to do. The cult of Mary places her on a pedestal as an ideal woman – although what I really mean is it places her on a pedestal as *a man's idea of* an ideal woman: she's quiet and submissive and supportive; she's something of a cypher to the actors in the Gospels; she's a rather

¹ Oscar Wilde: the Soul of Man under Socialism [1890]

two-dimensional figure who's there completing the tableau, serving her purpose, but who doesn't really exhibit much personality.

This is not the Mary we meet in scripture. She may have been obedient, but she wasn't passively submissive. She may famously have said to the angel "let it be with me according to your word," but just think what she was submitting herself to. She was undertaking to be a unmarried teenage mother. She was exposing herself to prejudice and stigma and ostracism. She was jeopardising her betrothal to the good man, Joseph. But she was prepared to stand up and be counted and be different; to be strong and independent, because she was following the call God was making in her life. And as the mother of Jesus she could be a pretty feisty character.

Now I do realise that the time when she described Jesus as a "very, very naughty boy," that was in Life of Brian, not scripture. My New Testament scholarship

can be a bit shaky, but even I know that one. But what we do get in scripture is Mary calling out Jesus publicly when she thinks he's paying insufficient attention to his family. We get her telling him to get on with his ministry at the wedding at Cana, and when he tries to put her down, she just ignores him and places him in a position where he has to do as she says, as if he hadn't said a word, as only feisty mothers can.

And of course the most gloriously feisty thing we have attributed to Mary is our Gospel reading this morning: the Song of Mary that we know by the name The Magnificat. It said or sung every night at Evensong. And Evensong might have quite a conservative reputation. It was a Tory Prime Minister, John Major, whose nostalgic vision of an ideal Britain was a land where spinsters cycle to Evensong. But the Magnificat is radical dynamite!

It is one of the scrapes that scripture should be most proud of ever having got into that the East India

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Company banned the Magnificat from being recited in the churches it administered – because it was subversive! It champions the powerful being brought down from their thrones, the lowly being lifted up, the hungry being filled with good things and the rich being sent away empty.

Celebrating Mary may be about acknowledging her obedience. But hers was an obedience to a way of life that was feisty and radical and subversive. And that is the tradition to which the Priory is dedicated – literally.

Amen.