

**The Birth of John the Baptist and also a
celebration of the Mothers' Union at the Priory**
Isaiah 40: 1 – 11; Luke 1: 57 – 66, 80

Today is the Feast of the Birth of St John the Baptist. It's also the day when we decided that – as we'd had a service a few months ago to celebrate the contribution of the Chat & Craft Group to the Priory's life and ministry – it would be a good idea to do something in recognition of everything the Mothers' Union does. And, in truth, the two don't fit together too cleverly – Birth of John the Baptist and Mothers' Union – except to say perhaps that John was born into a family and the Mothers' Union is all about supporting family life. But, there you go: I've said it now and that's about as far as I can take it.

What did jump out at me, though, about the Gospel reading from Luke chapter 1, is that when the Archangel Gabriel turned up, it was the bloke who got it badly wrong. The reason that, in our reading,

Zechariah is dumb and has to write down his messages on a tablet, is that he'd been struck dumb at the beginning of the story for not believing the angel's message and saying "We can't be having a baby because Elizabeth and I are too old." This contrasts with what happens six months later when Gabriel visits Mary and she – a woman – gets it right: "Here ma I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." And it reverses the sequence when the other old couple, Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament, are told they're miraculously going to have a baby in their old age. There it's Sarah who laughs in the face of the angel and it's the bloke who's given credit ever after for having faith.

This is just typical of the Old Testament. The whole thing is held within a narrative predicated on everything being a woman's fault. Even if a bloke gets it wrong, it's all because the woman is an evil temptress. And it's a mind-set that is proving remarkably stubborn to remove. Even now, after more

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than a hundred years of steady female emancipation, and even with all the momentum of the Me Too movement, even now young women are implicitly told, and sometimes explicitly told, that they're to blame for getting themselves sexually assaulted or raped. And yet Jesus empowers and gives agency to women again and again. And even right in the first chapter of Luke's account preconceptions are shattered, blokes with entitlement are put in their place and a young woman is entrusted with the supreme responsibility.

Perhaps we can take this idea of shattering preconceptions into our reflections on the Mothers' Union. The caricature of the Mothers' Union is, at best, of a gathering of like-minded women of a certain age meeting to drink tea and having a guest speaker, that's indistinguishable from the Women's Institute or the Townswomen's Guild or, for that matter, the Priory Ladies. At worst the Mothers' Union can be seen as an uncharitable and judgmental barrier to progress.

Reputational damage can be hard to undo. The reputational damage to the Mothers' Union was done as long ago as the 1960s when the Church of England was tearing itself apart over divorce. The Mothers' Union took an inflexible and conservative line, insisting that marriage could only be between one man and one woman for life. And they found themselves on the wrong side of history. Ideas about marriage do change; and it's noticeable now that even a conservative statement about marriage will inadvertently omit those words "for life." Because the probability is that a third of the straight people here this morning will have had previous marriages.

The Mothers' Union, whether in its local expression here at the Priory or at a regional, national or international level, utterly shatters those preconceptions. Members of the Priory branch are the backbone of all that we do. They are the go-to people providing support in our efforts to welcome and engage with hard-to-reach families in our parish. It's

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members from branches like ours across the country who provide holidays in static caravans for families who otherwise wouldn't get a break. There's one at Cayton Bay. The acronym for the scheme is AFIA – Away From It All. It's members from branches like ours across the country who go into prisons providing crèche facilities and refreshments for family visiting times.

Oscar Wilde said “Every prison that men build is built with bricks of shame//And bound with bars lest Christ might see how men their brothers maim.” The Mothers' Union ensures that Christ is found behind those bars embracing with unconditional love those of whom society is ashamed.

In a few moments I'm going to invite our branch's members to affirm their commitment to the Aims and Objectives of the Mothers' Union. Just listen to those Aims and Objectives now, and as you listen, reflect on their inclusive and progressive ethos.

Vision: Our vision is of a world where God's love is shown through loving, respectful, and nourishing relationships.

Mission: We will show our Christian faith by the transformation of communities worldwide. We will promote stable marriage, family life and the protection of children.

Objectives:

- To promote and support **married** life
- To encourage **parents** in their role to develop the faith of their children
- To maintain a worldwide **fellowship** of Christians united in prayer, worship and service
- To promote conditions in society favourable to **stable family life** and the **protection** of children
- To help those whose family life has met with **adversity**

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Values: Mothers Union is a Christian mission organisation working with people of all faiths and none. We are firmly rooted in a voluntary ethos centred on mutual respect and collaboration. Our governance, leadership, and programmes are driven by and undertaken through members within their own communities worldwide.

Beliefs:

- We believe in the value of each individual and their unique qualities
- We believe in the value of relationships. Jesus said, ~love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: love your neighbour as yourself.
- We believe in the value of the family in its many forms as a source of love and support for individuals and the basis for a caring community

These are the values we celebrate today. And it's for people in our congregation living out these values, week after week, that we give thanks.

Amen.