

Sermon 10th August 2008

Mary is one of the most important Saints remembered each year by the Church. Since the beginning of Christianity, we have always honoured those who have inspired faith in others, and those who have died for their faith. So today we celebrate one of the important saints, S. Mary the Mother of Jesus.

Mary was given an important job to do. God sent an angel to ask her to be the Mother of Jesus. Can you think of a time when God has called you to do an important job? What did that feel like? Some people feel inadequate, like Moses. Moses tried to wriggle out of God's call, saying he lacked the right gifts. He said he lacked the gift of the gab – that he felt inadequate as a speaker and that people wouldn't listen to him. Jeremiah was reluctant as well. He said he was too young to accept God's call and that no one would listen to him either. Perhaps you relate to that sense of inadequacy when God calls – I don't have the skills – I'm not worthy – someone else can do it much better than me.

Whether we like it or not, God calls us all to be bold and brave believers, ready to put our lives on the line for the sake of Christ and his church. This is why we thank God for Mary today because she was brave and bold, obedient to God's call. When God gave her an awesome task to fulfil, she did not hesitate to say "yes" to become the Mother of Jesus – thus allowing God to use her in his plan of salvation for the world.

Here is an ICON of Mary with her child Jesus. You can see that Jesus, the Son of God sits on her left arm. He is facing out with a scroll in his left hand and his right hand raised in blessing. Although he is the size of a child, he has the face of an adult. That is because Jesus is the eternal God who existed before time. He is the wisdom of God who has come into the world. He alone has authority to teach us and bless us.

Mary is presenting Jesus to the world. She is pointing the way to Jesus; she is pointing away from herself to Jesus. Her face is in an attitude of prayer, because she is aware of the presence of God, not only in Jesus who she is showing to the world; she is also aware of God's presence in her own life because of her own worship and prayer. So Mary is remembered first and foremost as a '*Christ bearer*' – one who presents Christ to the world. She carried the baby Jesus

in her womb; she presented him to the world; she points the way so that others can find Jesus, and she continues to be aware of the presence of God in her own heart.

Well Mary is long dead now, and she is not here to present Jesus to anyone. If you want to know what a Christ bearer looks like today, then take a look at the person sitting next to you! We need to know who we are, and what it is we celebrate today before we go any further! So have a good look at the person next to you! Or if you don't like staring take a quick glance!

We give thanks for Mary, because she is the first Christian, and she shows us what our task is - our task is to be *Christ bearers* – people who present Christ to the world - just as she did. In fact, Mary is often taken to be an image of the Church – as she is in this ICON. Here she reminds us of what it means to be church. If you think that is a strange idea, look at the fascinating image in the first reading today – that of the woman standing on the moon with a crown of stars. She is pictured giving birth to the Christ child while a great beast waits to devour the new born babe. This vision is an early image of the Church. The woman giving birth alludes to Mary, but the writer of Revelation sees the woman as the embodiment of the People of God. She stands on the moon in a place of honour before God, but she is struggling in the face of persecution, boldly facing down the powers of death, trusting in the providential purposes of God as she labours to bring Christ into the world. That was the situation facing those who wrote the book of Revelation as they faced persecution by the Empire. In a way, though, nothing much has changed for us. We face the dragon of indifference in bearing Christ into the world. The task of being a faithful Christ-bearer is just as much a struggle today as it was for our first century brothers and sister as people ignore the Christian message and treat us as being a rather quaint people with irrelevant ideas.

In the face of that Mary reminds us who we are. It's really very simple. We are to present Christ to the world, in season and out of season. How do we do that? First, we need to welcome God, to say "Yes" to God, just as Mary did when the angel Gabriel appeared. In other words, the incarnation (God becoming human) is not an historic event which happened long ago to Mary, the first Christian. It is a reality made real in our own lives by the power of God day after day as the Holy Spirit conceives the Word of God in our own bodies. Luke's imagery is really very clever. When we say "Yes" to God the Word is conceived within us – so that we become pregnant, as it were, with Christ. Through the Holy Spirit God is enfleshed in us so that we

carry him within the bodily reality of our lives – just as Mary did when she carried God within her womb.

Second, having welcomed God into our lives and having allowed the Christ-child to grow within us and become bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, we need to nurture God's presence through a life of prayer, listening to God's word, and responding with trusting and loving hearts. Our response to God needs to be a clear yes every day as we discern the activity and voice of God in the ordinary events of our daily lives, and in our listening to God daily as he comes to us in scripture. We need to set aside time every day in a special place to be with God, and to listen to what God has to tell us. Fellowship with other Christians is so important as we discern the voice of God together and encourage one another in our journey with God.

Third, having grown to know and love Christ, we need to point the way to him through our faithful witness; in the way we treat others with reverence and respect; in the way we take responsibility for our words and our decisions; in our struggle for justice, in our compassion for others, in the gracious way we welcome others into our lives. Mary's song, the Magnificat, shows she had a special regard for the poor and suffering, probably because she had to watch Jesus who became poor himself when he died on the cross. So part of our witness as Christians is standing with those who struggle to live; children without homes or parents; old people who are lonely and vulnerable; adults without jobs, teenagers without a sense of purpose. The more we are *Christ bearers*, the more we will find ourselves drawn to those who are unloved and wounded in our society.

Will you be a *Christ bearer* by giving yourself to God as Mary did? In your prayers, ask God to show you what he wants you to do and be for him. Wait patiently for his call, and when it comes, be bold and brave, and give your "Yes" to God with all your heart. The journey ahead will be exciting – I guarantee that God will not disappoint.