

(Isaiah 61:10-11; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 1:46-55)

Luke 1:46-55:

*Mary said,**'My soul magnifies the Lord,*⁴⁷ *and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,*⁴⁸ *for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.**Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;*⁴⁹ *for the Mighty One has done great things for me,**and holy is his name.*⁵⁰ *His mercy is for those who fear him**from generation to generation.*⁵¹ *He has shown strength with his arm;**he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*⁵² *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,**and lifted up the lowly;*⁵³ *he has filled the hungry with good things,**and sent the rich away empty.*⁵⁴ *He has helped his servant Israel,**in remembrance of his mercy,*⁵⁵ *according to the promise he made to our ancestors,**to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'*

Today we honour our patron saint, Mary. We are doing so because this is the nearest Sunday to one of the many festivals of Mary observed by the worldwide Church. The 8th of September is when Christians remember her birth, with August the 15th designated as the day of her death – or rather, her 'Assumption' (the nature of which we might explore on another occasion!). Major festivals are the Annunciation on the 25th of March, and the Purification on the 2nd of February. Nowadays, however, the Purification of Mary is observed as a festival of Jesus: marking his Presentation in the Temple – a festival better known as Candlemas.

So we can see that as the people of a church dedicated to St Mary we have a choice of dates on which to celebrate our Patronal Festival. When I was a curate in deepest Surrey our church there was also dedicated to St Mary and we opted for the 25th of March: the Annunciation.

But here I am pleased that our preference is this time of year. There is something about having a little celebration at the end of the summer, to set us up for the long journey through to Christmas!

At Tiptree in Essex, where I went to after my curacy, the church was dedicated to St Luke. It was built only in 1856, and so the exact date of its dedication was known: the 18th of October, St Luke's day. When I was there, we tended to observe that day as a 'Dedication Festival', rather than a Patronal Festival. This was to give thanks for the

witness of both the building and its people over the years, and to recognise our role as the ‘living stones’ of whom the church was built at that particular point in its history.

With our church building dating back to the twelfth century, we just do not know the date on which it was dedicated – but that should not stop us from holding a Dedication Festival. In the Lectionary there is provision where the date is not known for a church community to observe its Dedication Festival on the 7th or 28th of October, ‘or on a suitable date chosen locally’. So for next year that gives us a lot of scope!

We might also like to consider that knowing the year on which a church building was dedicated offers scope for the celebration of significant anniversaries. In Tiptree we held a 150th anniversary, and then in my last parish, Hersham, we celebrated 125 years. Both of these occasions gave a great opportunity to reach out to the wider community, inviting people to a variety of special events at *their* parish church.

The problem for us is that the only significant year in the history of our church building that we know with any certainty is the completion of George Gilbert Scott’s restoration: 1859. Maybe next year we could organise a 160th anniversary – or perhaps it is not too early to start planning the 200th anniversary, in 41 years’ time!

As you can see, the purpose of a Dedication Festival or of a Patronal Festival is to be outward-looking. We seek to engage with the wider community we are here to serve, to invite them to join us. This we have certainly done today, with the added incentive of cake and sparkling wine!

We also look towards our patron saint, Mary, and through her to God himself. In our gospel reading today, we heard those radical words of Mary’s Song, the Magnificat. Mary’s humble obedience, combined with a gritty determination – all founded on an unselfish love of God – serves as a good example to us in our Christian pilgrimage. All this is captured in our church banner, with its beautiful portrayal of the tenderness of Mary’s loving gaze at her young son. And Mary’s desire to see the fulfilment of the coming of God’s kingdom ‘on earth as in heaven’, where the values of this world are turned upside-down, demonstrates to us a deep sense of purpose.

So today, we can give thanks to God for the inspiring qualities of our patron saint, and every day we can commit ourselves to continue her work.

We can also recognise that from ancient times there has been a strong association between a worshipping community and their patron saint. We may find the idea of praying to a patron saint a little strange, but with Mary we need have no concern about asking for her intercessions. Indeed, there are many well-known prayers addressed to Mary, chief amongst them of course being the Hail Mary:

‘Hail Mary, full of grace.

The Lord is with you.

Blessed are you among women,

and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.'

Mary's Song contains the line, '[The Mighty One has] lifted up the lowly', and this applies not least to Mary herself. Her exaltation is alluded to in Christian art where Mary is usually depicted wearing a blue mantle – as am I in her honour today! In Western Christian art it is only Mary who is depicted wearing blue over red: exactly in line with many depictions of Christ himself. Blue, being the colour of the sky signifies heaven and the divine nature; red, being the colour of the earth or of blood, signifies the human nature. Christ and Mary alike are demonstrating our human nature wrapped in the divine nature. Exaltation indeed for lowly Mary – and another instance of the way Mary serves as a good example to us in our Christian pilgrimage.

Today, Sian Lawton is joining us as she begins the second year of training for ordination. Her story reflects that of Mary as she responded to God's call, in humility and obedience. Sian has no idea where that response will take her, but for this coming year as she learns from and with us so we can learn from her. We look forward to seeing how the addition of this new 'living stone' to our church will help us better to serve the communities of Richmond and Hudswell.

Welcome to you, Sian. Thank you, Lord, for Mary our patron saint. And thank you, Lord, for calling us all, together, to be St Mary's church here in Richmond.

Amen.