You may understand when I say that our kids ‘occaisionally’ challenge us and test our patience. When this happens, my thoughts are often brought to focus of our Mary, the mother of Jesus… …..Not the meek picture we see of Mary in the nativity plays…..but the Mary who gave birth without help in a stable after trudging through the desert for days….the Mary that brought into this world to Son of God….the Mary who watched her son die upon the cross…..Mary is overlooked by many and emotion can overtake me if I think of the pain that she must have gone through in loosing her son in such an horrific manner……We know that Jesus is the messiah, but to Mary he was her little boy…..it puts all things into perspective.

So today as we celebrate our patron, Mary, it’s all about Mary!

According to the biblical accounts in the Gospels, Mary grew up in Nazareth, a small village off the beaten track in Galilee, where she was engaged to a carpenter called Joseph. After the angel appeared to her with the news that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, she accepted this proposition although her question, ‘How can this be?’ reminds us that faithful action does not always have to depend on having clear answers to all our questions, sometimes we have to say ‘yes’ to God when the way ahead is not clear.

Our Gospel reading today retells the story of ‘The Visitation’. This is the formal name for the visit of the Virgin Mary to her elderly relative, Elizabeth, now Saint Elizabeth. The episode is described only in Luke’s gospel. It took place straight after the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was pregnant.

Mary’s first thought on receiving this news was for her elderly relative Elizabeth, who was also expecting a baby. So she immediately went “with haste” from Nazareth, all the way to Elizabeth’s house in the hill country near Jerusalem. After two or three day’s journey, she arrived at Elizabeth’s door and called out a greeting to her.

At the sound of her voice, two extraordinary things happened. Firstly, the baby in Elizabeth’s womb “leaped for joy” and secondly, Elizabeth was inspired by the Holy Spirit to praise Mary out loud. She cried out: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.” In reply to Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary gave a poetic speech known as the Magnificat and Elizabeth’s words later became part of the Hail Mary prayer. The episode of the two women sharing their excitement about their important pregnancies was also later included in the devotion of the Rosary, as the second ‘Joyful Mystery.’ The Mary of the visitation is often depicted by artists as innocent, meek and child like. Far removed from the Mary of my prayers.

I look around some of you and I can see you may be thinking…what’s Paul doing talking about ‘hail Mary’ and the devotion of the rosary….

I am acutely conscious that this is a topic which splits opinion. Some within the Anglican church, as soon as I even mentioned that we are celebrating Mary today, would have thought something along the lines of “What is all this Popish nonsense?”. So I wouldn’t want to disappoint. Here is a quote from Pope Benedict XVI (16th?):

Preaching on the Visitation, Pope Benedict said: “This event is not merely a courteous gesture but portrays in great simplicity the encounter of the Old Testament with the New. Indeed the two women, both of them pregnant, embody expectation and the Expected One. The elderly Elizabeth symbolizes Israel which is awaiting the Messiah, whereas the young Mary bears within her the fulfilment of this expectation for the benefit of the whole of humanity.”

He added: “The scene of the Visitation also expresses the beauty of the greeting. Wherever there is reciprocal acceptance, listening, making room for another, God is there, as well as the joy that comes from him.”

But this news that she was sharing so joyfully with Elizabeth was dangerous news… becoming pregnant out of marriage often resulted in stoning, but still she said ‘yes’ to God. This was a strong independent women, not a shrinking violet who blindly gave way to god will. We also know how after the birth of Jesus, Mary became one of the countless millions of refugees down the centuries, when she and Joseph fled to Egypt to escape the brutality of King Herod and some years later returned to Galilee. We are also told that Mary and Joseph went on to have other children including James, Joses, Judas, Simon, and some unnamed daughters. Thus we get the picture of Mary as the Jewish mother of quite a brood…..and with a large family comes sacrifice and hardship….even in todays much more affluent society.

**Pause**

One of the central tenants of Christianity is that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human. We talk about Jesus being the Son of God, or God the Son, so frequently that it trips off the tongue. We sometimes also remember that Jesus was the Son of Man, or a human being. But how often do we think of Jesus as the Son of Mary? Perhaps we do at Christmas but, to be honest, most nativity plays are, thankfully, short of realism and there is little real sense that Mary has given birth to Jesus and even less sense that this same person will feed, clean and look after this baby on their dangerous flight to Egypt to escape Herod’s slaughter of the innocents, that on their return to Israel she will continue to raise him through childhood, adolescence and onto adulthood, that she will sit at the foot of the cross and watch her son die when nearly all his followers had fled and she will still be with the church at the day of Pentecost. Jesus’ divinity comes from God, and from being God himself, but his humanity came from his mother Mary – Mary is humanity’s link with the humanity of Jesus.

We side-line this strong independent women at our peril. The Church believes that Jesus was both fully divine and fully human and he took his humanity from Mary. So maybe he looked like her, had her mannerisms, spoke with her Galilean accent. She taught him about God and he learned of his heavenly Father’s love through her human love. Rowan Williams has said that if we ignore Mary, if we shrug our shoulders and say it doesn’t really matter what kind of person she was, we deny the real humanity of our Lord.

So today when as celebrate Mary, let us reclaim this remarkable, perhaps feisty and vivacious, woman who was confronted with quite extraordinary events and remained faithful to God through them all.

Mary answered the Angel Gabriel with the words, “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word”, This is not a passive submission of someone who has no mind or will of her own, but as the enthusiastic co-operation of a lover of God. In the Magnificat she sings about what this means, a vast and worldwide concept of God’s salvation – scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, filling the hungry with good things. This is Mary, the peasant woman in a country occupied by the Roman political machine, articulating the yearnings of the poor and oppressed, refusing in God’s name to accept injustice. The Mary who sings with such joy is the same Mary we encounter in the Gospels discovering the day to day cost of that vision for her and for the son of whom she is so proud.

We should not be afraid of Mary. We should liberate her from the confines of the nativity play and recognise her as a fellow human being but one who was chosen by God to give birth to God. Without her story, both human and divine, our story would be very different.

May we who worship in a church dedicated to Mary, be as faithful, strong and sure of our own calling as she was. As we cry out:

“My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.”

Amen.