

Sermon at St John the Baptist Alresford Friday September 10 2021

September 8th is the birth day of the Blessed Virgin Mary

3 pictures for you to imagine.

Let's visit a picture gallery like the Uffizi in Florence. We see a great many pictures of upper class ladies in fine dress and in a gracious room – perhaps pictures of the Annunciation. Those who commissioned such pictures were wealthy and wanted to see the Virgin Mary as wealthy as they were.

A picture on your tv screens. A teenage Afghan girl mostly covered with robes, perhaps only 14. She is not wealthy, life is a daily struggle. Perhaps this is nearer reality. St Paul tells us that when Jesus became human he “emptied” himself of his divinity. So a young girl of no importance fits the profile. She sings a revolutionary song. God either does continuity (as we prefer) or Revolution as in Magnificat (there is a lot to be put right). St Paul says that God chooses the foolish to confound the wise. He tells the church in Corinth “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth” The Virgin Mary and the child she delivers are of one kind.

A third picture. We walk into an Orthodox church, perhaps on Cyprus where some of you have been with us. At the east end there is no great East window like ours. Instead there is a semi-circular ceiling and it is filled with a picture of the Virgin Mary. When we look up from our praying it is the Virgin that we see. And she is looking up – looking up to Jesus whose image covers most of the inside of the central dome. She refers our prayers to the Lord.

For most of my life I have not been easy with devotions to the Virgin Mary: but there comes a time when we have to ask ourselves whether we are always right – and what about our fellow Christians and what they believe? Maybe they have something to teach us. That is certainly what I

have learnt from the Orthodox Christians of the East -with whom, once, we were one church. What we look at as we worship is significant. There has always been some suspicion of images and pictures, but for many people pictures are an important, perhaps only, form of communication.

The Greeks call Mary “Theotokos” – the God-bearer. She is important because her child is so important. And that is why so many people also portray her as a rich and influential lady – The Queen of Heaven. As so often in our faith we have to hold together two things: one is the young girl, without importance or power – the other is the more mature well-born and wealthy lady. Joseph's bride and the God-bearer. Holding them together we do justice to the truth that cannot be reduced to one simple statement.

So, why do I tell you all this? It is so tempting to want to be important, to be somebody. But God regularly chooses people who are not important: the 7th son or a fisherman, for instance. Mary is a reminder that God works through people of no normal significance but who have one key quality: they have faith in the sense that they trust, even into the unknown future. We can all be like that as long as a desire for importance does not get in the way.

“People of no importance from an unimportant province” – W,H.Auden

