

**Sermon Preached by the Bishop of London
St Mary Abbots Kensington, 10th September 2023
Isaiah 7:10-14; Galatians 4. 4-7; Luke 1. 46-55**

This time last year we were due to mark the 150th anniversary of the present church on this site. Unfortunately, the death of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the 2nd prevented us from doing so. I am however delighted to be with you this morning. There has been a community of worshippers on the site for some 1000 years, making it the site of one of the earliest churches in Kensington. Even in the 151 years this building has changed, and it is wonderful to be able to bless the beginnings of your new accessibility project which includes an access ramp, re-hung doors to allow disabled access and a wheelchair area. It is a project which embodies the three pillars of your Mission Action Plan - Welcome, Discipleship and Outreach.

An earlier alteration to the church building was the spire added after the death of the architect, Sir George Gilbert Scott. It is one of the tallest in London and visible from a great distance. Although not as tall as the spire of Salisbury Cathedral where, as some of you may know, I was previously the Canon Treasurer. Now this does not mean I looked after all the money – rather I looked after the real treasures: the people and the building. This included the carpenters, glaziers and stone masons. When I left, I was given a piece of Purbeck marble – wonderfully cut and prepared and marked with a Stone Mason's Banker mark. Some of you may know that when stonework is undertaken stonemasons mark their stone with their insignia – a banker mark - each unique. Originally this was so they knew who to pay for what work. Although this is now not the case, they still leave their mark on the stones – the house of God.

We know that a church is not a building. It is made up of living stones – we are the church, the people of God. People exist to know God, to be known by him and to bring others into that place where they may also know God and be known by him. People walking towards God, towards each other and towards the world.

And so what should our mark be? Maybe our mark should be that of Christ. And today as we celebrate this patronal festival we not only celebrate the life of St Mary's, but we celebrate the faithfulness of this community, both in the past and now. We also look to the community Christ is calling us to be and the marks he is calling us to leave.

The reality is that understanding this or doing this is not always straightforward, and today as we celebrate The Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary we are reminded that this may take some wrestling with. So often we pass from the notion that Mary was perplexed by the message of the Angel for her obedience. In what depths of Mary's heart did she ponder the Angel's words? Did she wrestle with the meaning of the Angel's greeting?

There is a tradition of wrestling with God in the Bible, like the matriarchs of old, who struggled to believe that "*with God nothing shall be impossible*". Sceptical Sarah laughs, and wrestles with the messenger out of fear and does not quite recognize his divine. Rebekah's wrestling begins in conception and continues in her domestic manipulations despite the oracle's clear promise that Jacob will prevail over Esau. Rachel's "*mighty wrestling's*" in a birth contest with Leah produce 12 leaders, but end with her death as the "*child of her sorrow is brought forth*". Hannah's song, inspiring Mary's Magnificat, is a joyful response to the redemptive miracle of Samuel's birth. But Hannah experienced the absence that precedes the joy; Hannah wept and prayed to God in tears before her joyful response.

Between Gabriel's "*Greetings, favoured one,*" and Mary's "*Let it be according to your word.*" Mary is, by turns "*perplexed and confused*", in the New International Version she was '*troubled*' and in the New Jerusalem Bible she was "*deeply disturbed and asked herself what type of greeting this would be*". The Greek word which is used means deeply agitated and rather than pondered or wondered – and this can have a feeling of arguing. So Mary didn't just say 'I wonder, never mind it's ok' her state of wondering and pondering and arguing went on for a while. Rather than a mild crinkle of the brow and a small question mark above her head, Mary seems to have been taken aback, disturbed, unnerved, anxious and troubled by the appearance and message of Gabriel.

The calling of Mary is not dissimilar to the calling of Gideon in Judges 6:11. There the Angel appeared, promised that '*the Lord is with you*' and declared Gideon to be a mighty warrior and so he was. In the same way the Angel declared to Mary that the Lord was with her and that she was in receipt of divine favour which she would be when Jesus was born. Mary's distress at the greeting of the Angel arose from the fact that she knew that this was a calling like Gideon and that this could only mean an over whelming challenge.

In the same way that many judges and prophets were called in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, so Mary is called here to a task of great proportions. Only after expressing her wonder and dismay, and then hearing again Gabriel's affirmation and promise, does she manage to summon the courage to believe that God has indeed favoured her by working in her and through her for the health of the world and singing this wonderful song of joy. Having heard the words of the Angel '*do not be afraid for God is with you*' and that she is favoured Mary goes on to sing that God is with us, that God is powerful, that God is merciful, and that God is faithful. It is truly wonderful to be beloved by God even though it comes challenges beyond our imagination.

Looking around at the people in your congregation you are people favoured by God and through whom God plans to do marvellous things. Think how many other wonderful things there are that God wants to accomplish through us - so many that you and I couldn't begin to count them all. We are in all kinds of places and positions but through us God can still do wonderful things. But just like Mary we may be perplexed, confused, and perhaps troubled by what God calls us to do, that God favours us, and that God has wondrous things to accomplish through us.

So what will be the mark that we leave in the next 150 years? The church does not exist for us but for the salvation of the world. We are not about developing programmes, but about walking as the people in the way of God and into God and with each other. We are not a social charity but God's way of shining light in the world. We are not about making the church, we are about making disciples. Disciples who bring peace, who feed the hungry and who sit with those who grieve, and this is an act of relationship – we need to turn outwards to the world for which God gave his son. We are called to form relationships not just in the Church but in, and with, the world – the world that we are called to love.

God came into the world through the obedience of Mary and that God continues to come into the world and we are highly favoured by God. Although it is truly wonderful to be beloved by God, with this comes challenges beyond our imagination.

So, as we celebrate the faithfulness of those who have gone before, let us know that we are loved beyond our imagination and that God, who calls us, will be faithful. Amen