

Sunday 8th September 2024
Patronal Festival
Rev'd Emma Dinwiddy Smith

If you have ever made your way up these steps behind the organ, you may well have glanced at the long list of Vicars of Kensington, in whose footsteps I have had the honour and privilege to walk over the past five years.

The very first of these, recorded simply as Nicolas, is believed to have taken office as early as 1249. Every one of these vicars represents a generation of individual Christians who have come here to St Mary Abbots in times of joy and of sorrow, to pray, to sing, to hear God's Word, to share in the Body of Christ, to be married or laid to rest, to be baptised into the Church or to confirm their faith.

Although this building itself has been changed and even replaced completely a number of times, the deep sense of God's eternal presence with us continues unbroken across centuries of prayer and worship, and we feel it today, as we gather here to celebrate the Eucharist together as a community united by a common faith.

Every year, this Patronal Festival offers us the opportunity to re-tell the story of this very special church, and to remember the faith, gratitude and generosity which have inspired it, right from the very beginning.

In brief, in case there are those here to whom the story is new or only vaguely remembered: In the 12th century, the largely empty land around Kensington was owned by a family called the de Veres, whose main residence and estate were in Abingdon, close to Oxford. The son of the family, Godfrey de Vere, became seriously ill, and he turned for help to the local monastery of St Mary in Abingdon, after which, following three months of care and prayer from the Abbot and the brethren, he was healed. In his gratitude, he offered the Abbot a piece of land on his estate at Kensington, so they could found a new church and religious house near London. The Abbot, so we are told, built a church which he dedicated to St Mary, just like his monastery at Abingdon, but which was so closely associated with him that it became known as St Mary of the Abbot.

Despite all the mind-blowing changes which have turned the de Veres' rural estate into the well-known, thriving centre of commerce, culture and community which we see in Kensington today, the name of St Mary Abbots, with all its associations, has continued throughout the centuries. And why do we celebrate and remember all this today?

Our dedication to St Mary, the mother of our Lord, means that our thanksgiving takes place on or around one of the Feasts of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, 8th September, as we remember her joy, humility and obedience in following God's plan for the world.

Mary is a figure who has fascinated Christian believers throughout the history of the Church. She has been imagined as an ordinary, Jewish, teenage girl facing the disapproval of society at her unexplained pregnancy; as an agonised mother witnessing the unimaginable suffering and death of her firstborn child; as a pattern for perfect womanhood and as a mythical or even cultic figure, the Queen of Heaven, who sits at her son's right hand, pleading for sinners.

When for a Bible Study, I once typed out each of the passages relating to Mary in the New Testament, the participants were astonished to find that in total this came to less than 2,500 words. Perhaps you will have in mind particular stories of Mary from the Gospels, standing at the foot of the Cross or cradling the infant Jesus; astonished at the appearance of the Angel Gabriel, or going out to beg Jesus to stop his preaching so that no-one would think he was crazy.

Yet in all the letters of St Paul – the earliest of our Christian sources – there is only one single allusion to Mary, which we heard in our reading from Galatians: *“God sent his Son, born of a woman.”* Without Mary, without her obedience to God's Will, God's plan for the redemption of the world through his Incarnate Son would not have taken place – at least not in the way that it did. Christ came to us, *“born of a woman”*, bearing our human nature and sharing with us in the joys and sorrows of human life, just as Mary herself did.

Perhaps there is no more poignant dedication for a church than to bear the name of the Blessed Virgin Mary, as we pray each year that Christ will be born in our own hearts at Christmas, grieve with his mother at his death on Good Friday and rejoice in his rising from the dead at Easter. We ask that, inspired by Mary, we too may have the obedience, humility, devotion and faith to make Christ known in the world. It is a great aspiration to play a part in God's plan, as she did, and yet every man, woman and child called to faith in God has a role to play in witnessing to the risen Christ and in living out God's love for his creation.

St Mary Abbots itself has experienced much joy, but also sorrow and difficulty over the centuries, from floods and fires to bombing during the war and closure during the Covid pandemic. There have been setbacks, and we have grieved the loss of many in our congregations who played their part in our history, and whom we shall especially remember in the words of our Offertory Hymn.

Yet today, we are here, a thriving and growing church, drawing together people of all ages and nationalities, worshipping God, caring for one another, learning to be ever more welcoming to those who come here enquiring or seeking the love of Jesus Christ.

We have so much for which we can give thanks – for God's abundant goodness to each one of us as well as to our church, and we join today in Mary's joyful hymn of praise: *“My soul doth magnify the Lord... for he hath done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”*

Amen