

## **Mattins 08.09.2019**

Today the Church remembers the birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary. When I arrived in my last parish as Rector I found that little was made of the Church's feast of title – it was dedicated to the Virgin Mary and so we decided to rectify that matter but the question was which day to choose – August 15 – her death, or September 8, her birth – not an easy decision – and it was left to me!

There is a lovely example of Renaissance painting by Titian entitled 'The Assumption of the Virgin' and it shows Mary, the mother of Christ, being received into heaven in triumph leaving crowds on earth in longing and painful bereavement as she passes through cheering cherubs to be received in triumph and exultation by the Holy Trinity waiting to crown her. You cannot help but admire the painting but I have to confess to being worried by what I suppose I should call the 'theology' of the

picture – in other words 'Who is this?' Is this the Mary we read of in the gospel, Mary of Nazareth? There is something disturbing about this change of emphasis from being the 'nobody' in the gospel story to being the one whose glorious triumph and crowning is attended by all the exulting angels of heaven. Surely Mary is this ordinary village girl and surely it is her ordinariness which is her true glory. She was no one in particular but it was what God did with her – not her achievements, nor her goodness, not even her faith and obedience, but what God did and so set in motion that great happening, the Incarnation.

It set me a great problem. Some Protestants gasp at the very mention of Mary's name – they think it all very Roman Catholic. And yet you know I remember an occasion in our Cathedral over twenty years ago when I served on Chapter and we held a special service for the dedication of a

new sculpture by John Skelton of the Virgin and Christ child which had been placed in the Lady Chapel. The work had been commissioned by the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary and its members were made up of Roman Catholics and Anglicans – but also, yes, Methodists and Baptists and people from other Free churches. One Anglican theologian, John Macquarrie has said ‘A renewed theological consideration of the issues involved will increasingly lead Protestants to abandon their negative attitudes toward Mary and to join with their Catholic brethren in a glad ‘Ave Maria’. But even allowing for this there are still many who have some problems about the person or of the some of the titles given to her – Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, Mother of Mercy and so on. The truth is that all we know of Mary is what we read in the Bible and every story about her there is about God and God’s will for her – and her response to God which is a model for all human

behaviour. Surely the key sentence is her reply to the angel Gabriel ‘I am the Lord’s handmaid; let everything be according to your word’. Now that is faith. That is commitment to the will of God. That is obedience. It is the one thing necessary – the key – the essential human response before the power of God. It is this which makes Mary so special – her ordinariness – someone who is no one in particular and yet is called and used by Almighty God to whom she responds with this courageous faith – ‘Let your will be done in me’.

Mary has been described as ‘the first Christian’. She certainly sets before us the perfect pattern of human life but also of the Church as it should be. It is this which underlies the reason for every Christian church – of this Cathedral church, for here the gospel is proclaimed, here the sacraments are celebrated, here Christian men and women are drawn into fellowship with their

Lord and with each other. Here we believe Christ is present to us as he promised. Here we seek to show ourselves and our church to be like Mary, patient, trusting, obedient, and humble. 'Let your will be done in me'.