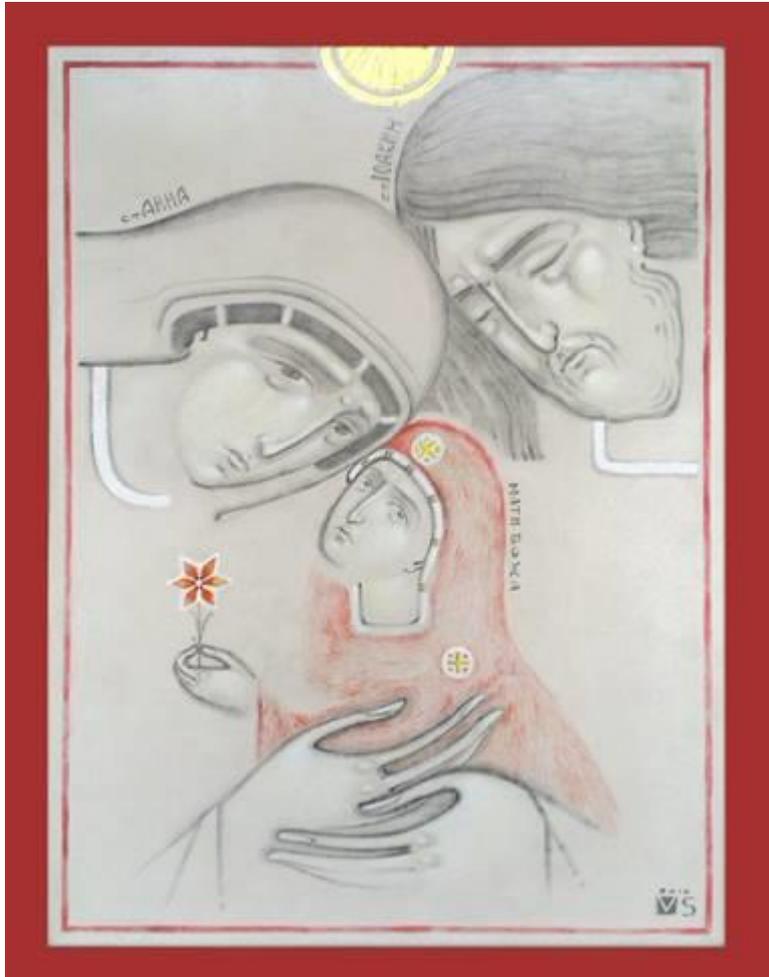


**8 September**  
**The Nativity of the Virgin Mary**

This sermon was preached at the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary Patronal of St Mary's Bathwick two days ago, and is offered here to celebrate today's feast.



*SS Anna and Joachim, and the infant Mary © Svitislav Vladyka*

**St Mary the Virgin, Bathwick - 6 September 2020**  
**200th Anniversary Patronal Eucharist**

Sometimes you know you are living through history. Our forebears (upwards of 1000 of them by all accounts) who were present for the consecration of this church, will have known they were living through history, and will never have forgotten it. For 800 years, their medieval parish church—Old St Mary's—had stood on the site now filled by St John's. But tiny and tired, the old church had been demolished two years earlier.

For the parishioners, these feelings would have been intensified by other events, because a new chapter was opening nationally not just locally. Less than a week before the consecration, George III, still the oldest and longest reigning king in British history, who for 30 years had suffered painfully for all to see, had finally died. It would be a further two weeks before his

enormous funeral in Windsor. And it was *into that gap* that the consecration of this church fell. Very few could remember life without Old St Mary's, or life without 'Farmer George', and no one knew what the future held. We perhaps share something of the same feeling today, as we look back on an era of our lives that has closed behind us, unclear what we shall carry into an un-certain future. And it is into this moment that the Virgin Mary, Bathwick's patron for 800 years, steps with grace and wisdom.

Two days after the George's funeral, a commemoration concert for the old king at the Theatre Royal in London, featured excerpts from his favourite music, Handel's *Messiah*, including a famous aria which is introduced by words we heard just now in our Gospel: 'Behold! A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and you shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us.' The Old Covenant, with its familiar laws and prophecies, all that God's ancient people had ever known, had arrived at a *new beginning*, and with it the old world was closing. The period of law was ending; the period of grace was dawning, recreating the old.

'Full of grace', the angel had called her. In the birth of the Virgin Mary, *and* in the birth of her Divine Son, an unstoppable and grace-filled transformation of the old world was happening. An unimaginable and uncontrollable newness. Old mysteries, laws and promises were giving way to a new revelation of reality and truth.

**2** From the very beginning, *who Mary is* is bound up with *who Jesus is*. Her body is always itself the 'holy place', the sanctuary, where God is at home. In the gospel stories we see her involvement with her Son: her young motherhood, her attendance in the mission field, her presence at Calvary, her receiving the resurrection news, her prayer with the Church for the descent of the Holy Spirit. And the climax of this life, lived in the Spirit with her Son, is *her* entry into *his* resurrection glory. When we are alongside *her* we are alongside *him* in his obedience, and suffering, and glory. And surely we are praying that our lives will become more like hers: shaped, marked, moved by her Son at every moment, until we too enjoy his company for ever in the risen life he promises.

It is this *inner* life of *active* faith that Jesus praises in Mary above all things. When (in Luke 11) a woman in the crowd, thrilled at Jesus's insight and wisdom, cries, 'Surely the womb that bore you is blessed, and the breasts that nursed you!' 'No!' he replies, 'it's those who hear the word of God and obey it that are blessed!' And who has ever believed and obeyed God's word more perfectly than his mother? – she who, according to her cousin Elizabeth, 'had believed that all that had been spoken to her by the Lord would be fulfilled'. Jesus affirms this even more strongly when he says, 'Here are my mother, and brothers, and sisters: anyone who does God's will!'

And the gospels make it clear that Mary's response *grew and developed*; she came to understand *more fully* the answer she had freely given to Gabriel in her youth. The letter to the Hebrews says of Jesus 'He learned obedience through what he suffered' (5.8). It is not surprising that his mother also discovered, as she went on—or rather as her *Son went on* his way to the cross—what her choice must more fully involve. As God was revealing a new world through her son, she came (not without suffering) to a clearer insight of the word of God to her, and *each time* decided to keep it, to deepen it, and to trust it.

**3** Whenever we look at an icon of the Virgin Mary, which are now so frequently seen in western culture, we see her *as what she finally became* – *beyond* the perturbing questions,

beyond the crucifixion, beyond love's victory over death and sin. We see her when, as St Paul says, 'the decaying puts on the un-decaying, and the dying puts on the un-dying' (1 Cor 15.54).

There are an infinite number of ways in which we can draw from the experience of this obscure peasant girl who has become 'the first lady' of heaven. Infinite, of course, because Mary points us to the Church's vocation. In the great tradition Mary is never detached from her Son, but nor is she ever detached from the Church of which she is the figure. Like her, the Church is called to be the ark in which Christ lives; the temple of God, the dwelling-place of God in the Spirit (1 Cor 3.16f). Like her, the Church is called to bring Christ to the world; to embody in its life not its own mission but God's mission: his desire to reconcile and unite the world to himself. Like her each of us has said yes to that vocation. But in each generation Christians have to grow in their response to the word of God. We have to live through the questionings the incomplete understandings, even learning obedience to that word by facing challenge and pain with courage. We have to discover that there is no new life without death to old life; there is no life in the new creation without death in the old creation; there is no entering into the gift without longing, praying and working for it.

But what might Mary, first disciple of her son, be saying to us now, in the midst of coronavirus, in a society and a world and a church brought to its knees? with an old world sliding into the past, and a new landscape opening up before us?

Perhaps it is something like this? In recent decades, in the world that is passing out of sight, the churches have tended to reduce the reality and truth of Jesus Christ and his resurrection to the practice of good deeds: to helping our neighbours, securing justice, welcoming refugees, providing for the elderly and disadvantaged, speaking into society's concerns etc. Even though, of course, these deeds are necessary, the main teaching of the Gospel is not goodness. Based on goodness the Gospel is reduced to a kind of humanism; and as many men and women of good will show us, human generosity does not require faith.

What requires faith, is *the word of God*. It requires faith to receive it, to live it, to fulfil it. Mary's testimony is the announcement of 'Good News' that Jesus Christ has shared our human life by total identification, has defeated sin and death, and opened the doors of an infinite future with God. Our good deeds are a *consequence* of such Good News, not the cause of it. The priority is to open the doors of heaven to ourselves.

As Handel's aria reminded the audience of the king's commemoration concert:

O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion  
get thee up into the high mountain;  
lift up thy voice with strength, be not afraid;  
say unto the cities of Judah,  
'Behold your God!'

## PRAYER

Lord Jesus, we see your obedience reflected in your mother's discipleship of faith. Help us to believe that all that has been spoken to us through your word will be fulfilled, and bring forth in our lives the Word of Life for the life of the world.