

2020 FEAST DAY OF THE NATIVITY OF BVM : Woodbridge St Mary

Happy Festival Day, everyone! St Mary's Woodbridge shares the same 'bubble' and the same 'Mother' as St Mary's, Great Bealings and in that we are blessed, and joined at the hip. We have cheated slightly because the Nativity falls next Tuesday, the 8th, but we keep the nearest Sunday!

Of course, Mary is no ordinary Saint as we know...which is why she has many different Feast days, the last one being on August 15th, which the Church of England is too shy to call the Feast of the Assumption! Who knows, it may be in times to come, that we will choose to celebrate different festival days in both our Churches so that we can have two different parties afterwards? It is best, I think, to layout my 'European stall' early on by saying how much I enjoy great liturgy involving as many people as we can muster, including great processions and lighting of candles...followed by the things we are missing most right now, food and fellowship, unmasked! I do not know your customs for this day but I am guessing that cake would feature and wine would flow!

Because this day marks the end of summer and the beginning of 'fall' as they say across the Pond, today has many thanksgivings and customs attached to it... If we consider the vine growers in France, they call our shared feast "Our Lady of the Grape Harvest". The best grapes are brought to the local church to be blessed and then some bunches are attached to hands of the statue of Mary – not easy here in the statue high up behind me – but hey, we have our own brand new Deacon now, and we can supply the ladders!! The festival meal would follow to include these new grapes, hopefully Suffolk ones at that.

In the Alps section of Austria this day is called "Drive-Down Day" when the cattle and sheep are led from their summer pastures in the slopes and brought to their winter quarters in the valleys. This was usually a large caravan, with all the finery, decorations and festivity. In some parts of Austria, milk from this day and all the leftover food are given to the poor in honour of Our Lady's Nativity.

So here's a challenge...how shall we celebrate Our Lady of the Deben with unapologetic 'European' flair and imagination in the years ahead? Will there be a flotilla of yachts and boats blessed by the Rector and raced by Fr John's daughter and colleagues? Will we make a big enough splash to make this day memorable for Woodbridge and Great Bealings and say loud and clear to these communities we love and cherish: 'It is ok to love God, to honour Mary as the

honoured 'Theotokos' – God bearer – join us, and come to the party and dance! The theological background, meaning, and reason behind today's Festival was not lost on the early Church and surely the whole point of theology is to reveal and explore and wonder at life's mysteries. Today we are specially invited to draw deeply on the sacrificial love of an uneducated teenager whose motherhood changed the course of history and whose profound trust in God defies even the cleverest theologian. That said, the great 4th Century Bishop, St Augustine, whose theology profoundly shaped the Western Church's understanding of sin and human nature, affirmed that "through her birth, the nature inherited from our first parents is changed." And again he suggested another image to us: "She is the flower of the field from whom bloomed the precious lily of the valley."

Not to be outdone, the Eastern Church also celebrates our Feast day with us, falling as it does nine months after the Conception of Mary. Andrew of Crete says today stands "on the boundary between the old and new covenants and ushers in the new dispensation of grace. Today is built a shrine for the creator of the universe."

No wonder then that we have pilgrimages to Walsingham, or Fatima, or Lourdes because these are places where theology and worship meet. No wonder we have Churches named after Mary, because her prayers for us and ours for her, live on. She points us to the Father through the life, death and resurrection of her Son. Some say, 'Home isn't a place, it's a person.' And I guess I am suggesting our spiritual home here and in Great Bealings is intricately bound with the life and dedication of Mary. Our home is with her.

I have a friend of a friend who was a chaplain to the little convent of All Hallows in Ditchingham which has, sadly, now closed. I was given a bookmark there, not unlike the image on the inside of your pewsheets, and on the reverse the simple phrase or prayer which I've never forgotten: "Nestle, don't wrestle." Of course that is a reference to a baby or a child that is content rather than irritable. But perhaps it conveys another deeper meaning for us as well. Perhaps we should be content and happy to make our home in Mary as we should be content and happy to be called to Christian discipleship. Instead of being a conversation-stopper, let it be a conversation-starter! We belong to St Mary's and the person is more important than the place. We belong to an

honourable tradition for the Mother of God whose song and tune can never be forgotten and never die: 'Sancta Maria, Ora, ora pro nobis.' AMEN.