

GREAT BEALINGS FESTIVAL ON THE BIRTH OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

Today we celebrate another, different Feast of Mary, the Mother of God. And this Church was not dedicated to the Feast of the Assumption which we celebrated on August 15th in Woodbridge, but the Feast of Mary's birth – the nearest Sunday to September 8th.

So you can see we have got in a muddle at the top of our service sheets but the icon puts that right! If you are patient enough to read at home the verses preceding our Gospel today, Matthew is keen to tell us from Chapter 1, verse 1, **all** the ancestors of Jesus Christ and to get them all in the right order. So even when today we celebrate the birth of Mary, the towering figure in red also tells us and shows us Mary's mother, St Anne. They form a kind of trinity, a line of succession, three generations with Jesus the smallest and still centre. Each are joined and united and, looking so directly at us, as if to see through us - wanting us to respond willingly and lovingly.

So let's think first about our own Mums. Has anyone brought along a picture of their own Mum today?..

I am showing my age when I think of photo albums and, of course black and white pictures. Now everything is digitalised, streamed, you name it! But what makes our own Mums so special, what characteristics come to mind?..

When I think of my own Mum in Eastbourne at 91 years young, I give thanks that she still looks out for me, and prays for me, and encourages me – the caring and the loving and the asking (and yes, sometimes the nagging) goes on. So all of us can relate to that close bond between Mary and Jesus, the physical and emotional ties. And all of us can relate to the hardest part of motherhood – letting go. I mean when we left home (that's a lot later in life nowadays), when we said we needed to do our own growing up in our own way...until, of course, we returned home to share the ups and downs of family life, the tensions and the joys.

In the New Testament I often think of that wonderful miracle at the wedding feast in Cana, when Mary felt all her influence or control was slipping away from her. Her Son seemed to be showing off, releasing magical powers enough to embarrass any Mum or Dad, and she gave in and said 'Do whatever He tells you.' When so often in everyday speech, we hear someone say they have lost their daughter or son, what they really mean is their loss of control. Today's

Feast is a great reminder of the importance of letting go and letting Emmanuel be the best guide and companion for the rest of our lives, whatever befalls. Isn't this why we call Mary blessed? Isn't this why we too are blessed by her example, her suffering and sacrifice and letting go that we may discover our own vocation to grow in Christ, to grow up in him and grow old in him.

I want to say just two more challenging things. We share the gift of Mary in our new Benefice. Unfortunately in a moment of puritanical terror, you will see the empty plinths where statues of Mary and the Saints would have 'lived' as you approach this Church and so many others. Isn't it time we put the iconography, the picture, the sculpture back where it belongs for all to see? St Mary's Playford or St Mary's Ufford are good modern and artistic examples where that has happened. Instead of destroying the story of Mary and her 'Magnificat' we surely want to show her off instead, and adopt her: as the inspiration for our Christian family in this place? Instead of Christian terrorism centuries ago, we need to **honour** the God-bearer, the one who carries on being our Mother and carries on inviting us into the company and fellowship of God's unconditional love and, our future.

And secondly, the danger of nostalgia or sentimentality. I am thinking about the so-called 're-union' of my favourite pop group: ABBA!

'Mama Mia' takes on a new meaning for us if we think that time stands still or that we wish everything could still be as it was. I am looking forward to hearing the new records but I don't want to see the group projected as ageless, timeless on a big screen, as if their lives stopped in the 1970s. I want to see them today, wrinkles and all! I want to see the generational line that St Matthew wanted us to see. We do not live for ever so let's stop pretending that we can or we should?

Thinking of the many sadness's of the last month whether in Afghanistan or much closer to home – seeing lives wasted or lives cut short – let's take today as a new beginning to draw closer to Mary and the good news of her Son; how we can serve one another more faithfully; and yes, how we can form new friendships and opportunities as the people of God in this beautiful part of the world. I for one, am passionate about concentrating on what unites us (instead of how we are different) and how exciting it is to travel together hopefully with the aid of the ongoing prayers of Our Lady. Mary our Mother cares most of all

that we replace nostalgia with God's presence now among us and His desire for us to grow into that mature place where love, fidelity and peace can flourish... enough to change hearts and minds to see whom we worship and why. Glory be...

AMEN.