

Gaude Maria!

Like Sue our new Rector I am somewhat of a newby. Having been ordained 20 years ago I served as a House for Duty Priest near Oxford and more recently as a stipendiary Rector in East Sussex. I retired in early February and Shirley and I moved to our house in East Grafton in March and we are beginning to settle into the area. Now that Permission to Officiate has been granted I have been privileged to take part and have led a number of services in the area. Over the past few months I have enjoyed attending some of the different churches within the Savernake Team, although I have still yet to attend a service at Shalbourne or Tidcombe. It has been rewarding to travel around and visit these beautiful churches.

As one would expect there are a variety of dedications in the group. Three to the Archangel St Michael; I like the idea of an Archangel in the parish. There is one for St James, another for St Katherine bound upon her wheel, a St Andrew to keep those with links to north of the border happy and two "All Saints"; so no-one is left out. Added to that are two St Nicholas', whom we should celebrate on 6th December but in this country we tend to wait until Christmas Eve. Two within the team are dedicated to St Mary, who at this time as the AV delicately and movingly puts it was "great with child". Her term moves towards its fulfilment during this season of Advent.

We are not really given to "Hail Marys" but here is one for the season;

Gaude Maria, Cristis Moder! Mary myld, of the I mene;
Thou bare my Lord, thou bare my broder; Thou bare a louly child and clene.

These simple lines are taken from a late medieval hymn imitating Latin verses to Mary, Mother of God. Such prayers, hymns and verses abounded in late medieval England. It was commonplace to address prayers to the Mother of God, honoured for "The Joys of Mary"; traditionally five in number, the Annunciation, Nativity, Resurrection, Ascension and her own Coronation in heaven. But most of all the "Sorrows" were a focus of devotion, encapsulated by the *Stabat Mater*, a meditation of the grief of Christ's mother. Churches throughout England were filled with images of the Virgin. They would have been dominated by a Rood screen with the figures of the Crucified Lord attended by her and other saints.

The Reformation swept much of this imagery away and with it the adoration of the Virgin. Ancient statues and carvings were forcibly torn from horrified parishioners. Latterly for many, statues of our Lady echoed too much of an alien and southern European spirituality, almost banished from these islands by stern reformers. An over-emotional and sentimental response became somehow rather un-British. Amongst them the hysterical wailing of Margery Kempe, a late medieval woman known for her extreme response to spiritual stimuli would seem very out of place today.

Yet two of our churches are dedicated to St. Mary the Virgin. The face of spirituality has changed since the struggles of the English Reformation and yet the symbol of Mary, although sometimes neglected, is a powerful and a human way to consider the ways of God. Like liturgy, reflection and prayer, meditating on the Joys and the Sorrows of the Mother of God can put our own trials in perspective. Advent is a good time to think of Mary and to reflect on her openness to God's call and the way in which she suffered for it.

We have moved on from the tensions of the Reformation. The tearing down of statues from our Churches, the vandalism of dissolved monasteries is past, reflections on the life of the Virgin Mary are widespread and give us an insight to a particular spirituality. A spirituality that gives us new and different insights. (Women reading this will probably think that they have always had such insights, it is just that on the whole they have been overlooked.) For Anglicans this year, this aspect of Advent is especially pertinent as we prepare for the first woman Archbishop of Canterbury.

Advent is a time to be open to what God's call might mean to each of us, a call to be open to the unexpected, to be open to the possibility that a response to that call might be inconvenient. Let us pray that we are open to receive the call of God just as Mary was. Let us pray for our church and the many challenges it faces, for our Archbishop designate, for our local team and all our churches and for ourselves that we may be prepared to welcome the incarnate Lord this Christmas and always.

Revd Jonathan Meyer