

Friends,

Today is what some Christians call 'Lady Day', the Feast of the Annunciation to Mary by the Angel Gabriel. St Luke relates the episode (1.26-38) in his Gospel as part of his rich, evocative narration about the birth of Jesus. It usually comes in Lent (sometimes even in Holy Week) and is, in traditional customs of worship, the one occasion in the course of Lent when the fast is rescinded and 'Alleluias' are sung. Usually in our parish a Eucharist is celebrated in the spectacular Lady Chapel in St Helen's, but that is not possible this year owing to the corona virus. So this brief word comes to you instead.

The Blessed Virgin Mary stands within the Christian spiritual universe in many guises. All of us have a claim on her, for, as we know from the Gospel reading for last Sunday (Lent 4 and Mothering Sunday; John 19. 25b-27) Jesus' last exhortation to his mother, as he hung upon the cross, was to commend the disciple John to her. Henceforth she would be *his* mother. Her maternal love was, and is, to embrace all those who count Jesus as their brother as well as their Lord and Master. If Jesus is our spiritual brother then Mary is our spiritual mother. So I think it's a shame when Christians disregard Mary's place in their spiritual lives. That seems to me to ignore important strands in the witness of the Gospels; I wonder too whether it is healthy for our spiritual psychology.

However that may be, the fact is that from very early days Christians lived and prayed with the Mother of Jesus close to the centre of their spiritual world. (Not at the centre--only God the Trinity can 'stand' there.) Did you know, for instance, that there is even a *Gospel of Mary*, written, it is alleged, by St James, the Lord's brother?¹ After all, just plain-normal people wanted to know more about Jesus' background than the four Gospels were prepared to tell: how did Joseph and Mary meet? What was Jesus' childhood like? Was he a 'good boy', etc.? They also wanted to know more about his mother Mary and her childhood.²

One of those traditions about Mary tells of her part in weaving a new curtain for the Temple in Jerusalem (the curtain, that is, which divided the Holy of Holies from the sanctuary). It was when weaving, the tradition goes, that the Archangel Gabriel appeared to Mary.³ Perhaps it was with that work of weaving a veil in mind that Christians in Constantinople, centuries later, prayed that the Virgin Mary would shield the threatened city with her 'protecting veil'. (A remarkable musical interpretation of the theme of 'The Protecting Veil of the Mother of God' by the British composer John Tavener is well worth a listen, especially if you enjoy the cello.)

¹ Usually referred to as the *Protoevangelium of James*.

² To see these traditions in remarkable artwork, visit the church in Chora in Istanbul which preserves late-13th-early 14th century frescoes and mosaics, including an image of Jesus at school writing on a tablet in Aramaic!

³ Rowan Williams reflects on this story in *Ponder These Things. Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2002), pp. 59-70.

That would have been a natural step to take when we consider that one of the earliest prayers in continuous use among Christians is a prayer to Mary for protection.⁴ As the invisible threat of corona virus hover amidst us all the gift of this Lady Day, maybe the gift of her feast this year is to remember this ancient Christian prayer for protection:

*Under your compassion we take refuge,
O birth-giver of God;
Do not overlook our prayers in the midst
of our tribulation,
but deliver us from danger,
O pure and blessèd one. Amen.*

Have a happy, prayerful feast!

~

The Revd Dr Charles Miller, *Team Rector*

⁴ The prayer was found on a scrap of papyrus dated 250 AD, but clearly was in use before that. In our western tradition it is known by the first three words of its Latin words: *sub tuum praesidium*.