Sermon at the Festal Eucharist for the Patronal Festival of St Mary Abbots

13th September 2020 *Mother Emma*

*Reading: Luke 1:46-55*

Today we give thanks to God for St Mary Abbots. Our church – along with all the previous church buildings which have stood on this site – has stood as a witness across the centuries to the love of God, the saving work of Christ, and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Our dedication to St Mary, the mother of our Lord, means that our thanksgiving takes place on or around the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, 8th September, as we also remember her joy, humility and obedience in following God’s plan for the world. As the healing power of Christ’s story teaches us how to live in love and hope, so the Magnificat, or Song of Mary, reminds us of God’s abundant generosity to each one of us, and of our calling to remember our debt of gratitude to him for all his many gifts: “My soul doth magnify the Lord… for he hath done great things for me, and holy is his Name.”

Hope and healing, generosity and gratitude.

In my online assembly for St Mary Abbots School this week, I retold for the children the traditional story behind the name of our shared church and school. I am sure that most of you are only too aware of this, but please forgive me if I recap it briefly in the context of this day and of this sermon, especially for any to whom it is new.

In the 12th century, the largely empty land around Kensington, as we know it today, was owned by a family called the de Veres, whose main residence and estate were in Abingdon, close to Oxford. The son of the family, Godfrey de Vere, became seriously ill, and he turned for help to the local monastery of St Mary in Abingdon, after which, following three months of care and prayer from the Abbot and the brethren, he was healed. In his gratitude, he offered the Abbot a piece of land on his estate at Kensington, in order to found a new church and religious house.

The Abbot, so we are told, built a church, which he dedicated to St Mary, to echo the monastery at Abingdon, but which was so closely associated with him that it became known as St Mary Abbots. Although that church later fell into disrepair, and was completely re-built several times, the last being the erection in 1872 of the building in which we worship today, the name, with all its associations, has continued throughout the centuries.

It recalls for us this touching story which also has its roots in the healing power of prayer and the hope it brings; together with the generosity and gratitude which God’s healing, revealed through the actions of his people, can provoke in others.

This Patronal Festival is, of course, for me, the first anniversary of my Induction as Vicar of St Mary Abbots, on the Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary last year. Several of you have kindly written to me, commenting that none of us could have anticipated then what a year would lie ahead!

Over the past twelve months, we have seen our church, our community, our country and indeed the whole globe undergo dramatic and unexpected changes. We have, individually and together, faced fear, loneliness, sickness, bereavement, economic uncertainty, or financial hardship. For the first time in the history of Christendom across our nation, churches have been obliged to close their doors, and to maintain their worship and pastoral care online or by phone. (What, we ask ourselves, would the twelfth-century Abbot of Abingdon have made of that?)

Yet we have also seen many instances of hope, of healing, of self-sacrifice, generosity and gratitude, expressed across our nation, and found here within our own community.

But this weekend, even as we give heartfelt thanks for the return of our choir to lift and inspire our worship, people are beginning to be anxious again. As the fear of a second wave or spike, and the measures which might be needed to mitigate this, raises its head, we wonder what we may have to face in the winter months ahead.

We hope and believe that we have learned more about coping with the deprivations of lockdown; that we have learned restraint and compassion, and that we have been inspired by the many, many medical and careworkers, shopkeepers, school teachers and other keyworkers, who have kept us going. We have experienced prayer and worship in new ways – but we have perhaps also, in returning to the church, been reminded by a period of closure, of how much it matters to us to be able to bring our joys and sorrows before God as a community. We hope and pray that churches will not be asked to close again; that the measures we have devised for keeping one another safe and protected will be enough to allow us to stay open for all.

But today, we gather together, we give thanks in any case for the joy and gratitude of the Virgin Mary, as, in spite of a situation in which she faced public criticism, social ostracization, and anxiety at the painful path which lay ahead of her, she was still able to sing of God’s love and greatness.

As we rejoice in the beauty of our choir, and the gift of music to lift our hearts and our spirits to God, along with the opportunity to share together in the Body of Christ, and the chance to worship once again in this House of God, which has held so many stories of hope and compassion, may we dedicate ourselves once again to God’s service and praise, whatever another year may bring.

At the end of the service, we shall join in the Solemn Prayer of Dedication of St Mary Abbots.

Faced with the uncertainties which lie ahead of us, may this be a year in which the church and community of St Mary Abbots shine forth with the hope and healing, generosity and gratitude, which has marked our story out from our very beginnings, and which continue to bear witness to the greatness of the Holy Trinity we serve.