

St Edmundsbury Cathedral



St Mary's Woodbridge – Patronal Festival (Visitation)

Sermon preached by the Reverend Canon Philip Banks

Luke 1.39-49 Romans 12.9-16 Zephaniah 3.14-18

Let love be genuine – outdo one another in showing honour.

Imagine yourself standing in front of a painting.

A nativity scene: not the birth of Jesus, but a fresco which I lighted upon when I was on retreat in Rome. It dates back some 500 years. Bits are missing, but it is still glorious in its polychrome colour.

It is a nativity scene with a detail I've never seen before. It shows the birth of John the Baptist. Depictions of the Nativity of John the Baptist are not unusual – there are plenty of artists who have depicted that.

What caught me was the way in which *Mary* was depicted.

Picture the scene: Mary's cousin Elizabeth has just given birth to John the Baptist: she is reclining on a couch looking somewhat exhausted and bedraggled as you might expect, a rather woolly-looking halo around her head. John the Baptist is in swaddling clothes being looked after by his family at one side of the scene.

What caught me was that instead of Zechariah being there in the scene (other John Baptist nativities show Zechariah prominently and writing on a tablet "his name is John").

No: instead, centre-stage, is Mary – clearly pregnant – ministering to her cousin Elizabeth – right by her bedside, holding what looks like a bowl of porridge, and spooning some to Elizabeth.

It caught me as I sat in quiet contemplation of the fresco, because it drew me to Mary's words at the Annunciation: "here am I, handmaid of the Lord". The word used in the original Greek is *Doulé*: which means *helper* or *servant* – or *handmaid*. For Mary, being a handmaid of the Lord was not just about bringing Jesus to birth, but about serving God's purposes of love. How shall I be handmaid, how shall I be Good News? Here is Mary straightaway being 'good news' in a very practical way: a handmaid for her cousin Elizabeth at John Baptist's birth.

Let love be genuine – outdo one another in showing honour says St Paul

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The lives of all these people are so intertwined and so crucial to the to the Christian story and what has shaped us as Christians today.

There's Elizabeth, the Virgin Mary's cousin – the Visitation narrative we heard in the gospel: If there'd been no Elizabeth there would be no John Baptist: his humility born of a deep work of God in his life – preparing people's hearts for the coming of Jesus, love made flesh.

And back to the person of our blessed Lady St Mary – your patron saint at St Mary's. We say the same of her: if there had been no Mary, we'd have no Jesus, and no Christian faith to give meaning and purpose and shape to our journey of life. So it is right on this Feast of Title and Patronal Festival to come with thankful hearts for Mary's part in our salvation.

But the question always for me as I stand at any lectern or pulpit is the 'so what?' question: CS Lewis (in his Screwtape books) says "don't tell me *what* you believe: tell me what *difference* it makes that you believe".

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As you try to imagine that fresco I described: the invitation and call to be *Doulé* - handmaids/servants of Jesus' heart of love. What do others see in me? What do others see in you? Do my/your words, life choices, actions, *reactions* – do they serve (Doule) draw others to, and give others a glimpse of the light of Christ's heart of love?

I don't know how you would describe 'Church': here's my attempt: The 'Church' was and is simply a bunch of women and men, young and old, rich and poor, so impacted by the life, teaching, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus, that people formed a community, following him, just trying to make a difference in the world and in the communities and people they came into contact with.

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That is what we – you and me – are called to do today. We see so much unkindness in the world, so much shouting and indifference, so much arrogance amongst our politicians, so much collusion with injustice. It breaks God's heart of love. It breaks the heart of Jesus. It breaks our hearts. I heard it said recently that 'the world needs a heart transplant'.

We – you and me – we are called to be signs of something so very different: the church is called to be a sign of the scandalous, capacious, inclusive hospitality of God's heart of love. Jesus wants us to have hearts of flesh – that feel the pain and joy of those around us. *Let love be genuine – outdo one another in showing honour.* That's what you are called to here at St Mary's isn't it.

Yet we are only human. I am reminded of the Peanuts cartoon in which Charlie Brown comes to visit Lucy at her five-cent psychiatrist booth. Lucy says to Charlie Brown that life is like a cruise liner. Some people like to put their deckchair at the back of the liner and like to look back at where they have come from, their achievements, sit on their laurels. Others like to put their deckchair at the front and look ahead to the future – fresh ideas and challenges. What about you, Charlie Brown? Where do you put your deckchair on the cruise liner of life? There is a long, sad, bemused pause. 'Heck', Charlie Brown says, 'I don't even know how to put the deckchair up!'

Life can feel a little like that can't it. Our journey of faith can feel like that. Yet St Paul *Let love be genuine – outdo one another in showing honour.*

But we can and do long for and aspire to be – with St Paul – people who clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, who can be people with infectious, thankful hearts. People who do those small acts of kindness which, drip-by-drip, contribute to the collective vision where everyone can feel loved and valued. *Let love be genuine – outdo one another in showing honour.*

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So. It is a real joy to be here with you today. In this church, sacred space, where people have come in all of life's changes from birth to death, where you sing that different song – to be signs of God's heart of love. And to come together to say thank you for the sheer hard work and prayerfulness and slog and dedication (I have no doubt) of so many people who seek to continue to make St Mary's a place of service and generosity of heart.

And in answer to the question where I started – are you the *Doulé* - the handmaids, servants of Jesus, Mary's child, are you servants of his heart of love?
Only you can answer that. I've no doubt that you can say an emphatic YES, acknowledging – like the rest of us – that
 there's lots more to learn;
 plenty more to do;
 and lots more to celebrate in the years to come.

And God is with you to inspire you and gently challenge you
Let love be genuine – outdo one another in showing honour.

Philip Banks 1 July 2023

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