

Sermon for St. Mary's, Woodbridge

Sunday 7th June 2026 – Festival of Mary

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

It is a huge joy to be here today to worship with you on this special Sunday and I'd like to thank Fr. Nigel for inviting me. I bring greetings from St. Michael's Framlingham and All Saints Saxtead and also the two Christian communities at The Hill and The Bay at HMP Hollesley.

Most of you won't know me so a short introduction. I am curate at the Benefice mentioned and also Alison's colleague, Anglican chaplain at the prison where I've worked now for nearly 5 years. I was ordained priest in St. Edmundsbury Cathedral in 2024 and before that I was a Reader. This is a first for me, as I've never preached at a Patronal Festival before and actually not preached about Mary before either, so this is a whole new experience for me. I hope that what I have to share today will resonate with you in some way and that we can learn something more about this remarkable, blessed woman who bore our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

It's unusual for me to have the reading from Luke 1 at this time of year. I'm used to reading it during Advent when we are looking forward to the coming of Jesus' birth. Luke's gospel is the main source of the birth narratives for John the Baptist and Jesus and where we have the main stories about Mary too. Luke is keen to set down accurately the background to these two great men of God and in doing so we meet Mary and Elizabeth, Zechariah and Joseph and understand more about the families they were born into. In Luke 1 we have these foundational stories of the angel appearing to Zechariah and to Mary and the miraculous births being foretold. Then in this section we see Elizabeth and Mary celebrating together at the miracles that have brought about their pregnancies and looking forward with joy to the salvation Mary's

child will bring. 2 very different women, in very different situations but with a single joyful purpose – to be obedient and to serve God.

I have three words for my sermon today which I want to look at but at first they might seem somewhat harsh, maybe even shocking. They are: NOWHERE, NOTHING and NOBODY. You may wonder what I'm thinking of but I want to use them to show how God works in the lives of those people we know about so well in the Scriptures, especially Mary, and to think about how God might be working in our lives too, here and now.

So let's think about the word "nowhere" first. Nazareth! Nazareth was a small town with very little to commend it. You might remember Nathaniel's quip in John chapter 1 verse 46, when he says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" It obviously had a reputation in the area for being something of a non-place. It is the first mention, chronologically, of Nazareth in both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. It's not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible at all and it's equally never mentioned by the historian Josephus, and it's not mentioned in any of the apocryphal writings, between the testaments. In fact, the most remarkable thing about it is how unremarkable it is. It is not really near anywhere – 15 miles from the Sea of Galilee and about 6 miles from the nearest main road – and yet this is where the mother of our Lord is living and where the Angel appears to her.

It may be the first time Nazareth is mentioned in the Bible but it's certainly not the last and Jesus will forever be identified by his connection to that place. The place of his living was written on the plaque that Pilate put on the cross above his head alongside his title "King of the Jews" and so that place is remembered down through the ages in connection with Jesus. God takes this insignificant place and gives it a name that nobody will ever forget.

"Nothing" – God creates the baby in Mary's womb and so in a sense, Mary does not have to do anything. That is not to belittle the immense moment when Mary says to the Angel, "'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'" In that moment, her

obedience to God was second to none, but in essence it happened to her. She didn't go on a quest or a dangerous journey, or like Old Testament heroes, fight enemies, be taken prisoner or face death, but being pregnant, she was to experience one of the most natural and common things that young women of that time would experience. Now I've had 3 children and so I'm not playing down the challenge of being pregnant and having those children – and especially for Mary, who was probably a young teenager, who would face derision and judgement from all those around her for being pregnant out of wedlock – the situation she found herself in was full of difficulties and she said "yes" to it! But once she did that, it did just happen to her.... God took Mary's obedience and faith and used it for his purposes in the most miraculous of ways and blessed Mary and us through it.

And that is why, to use that perhaps shocking word, this "nobody" has been and is now the most well-known, revered and venerated woman of all time. To all intents and purposes, the Angel Gabriel appeared to someone who, in the world's eyes, was a nobody. She was a girl in a patriarchal society. A teenage girl as well in a society where children had no rights and were treated as possessions not as people in their own right until they came of age. A teenage girl who, once she became pregnant without a husband, faced being ostracised and outcast from that small, rural community and indeed could have been put to death by stoning. But through her faithful obedience she became the mother of the Saviour of all people and whose words of her song that we read today, has spoken to millions and millions of people down through the ages of God's saving grace and goodness, God's love for all of his creation and his outworking of his promise to Abraham that his children would be a blessing to all nations.

In her song, some of which we read today, we get a glimpse of the Mary that God knew so well that he was sure of her answer before she even gave it. The Mary who knew her Bible, (there are at least references to 3 psalms, 1 prophet and 1 history book!) who believed God's promises and was humble enough to accept the task given her. The Mary who

looked past the fear and focused on what God had done for her, praising him for his goodness towards her, Israel and for humankind.

So how do I sum up? It doesn't matter where we come from, our background, our heritage, our tradition – God can use us. It doesn't matter what we think we can or can't do - God can use us. It doesn't matter who we are – God can use us. All he needs is for us to follow Mary's example – to thank him for his goodness and mercy, to trust in his promises and be willing to say "yes" when he calls wherever that may lead us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Revd Edith Peck