

GB Patronal 2026

While Liz and I were away, we spent a lovely evening in a little gem of a monastery on the Lancashire/Cumbrian border which I had taken a parish to many years ago, for a Quiet Day. The resident nuns are Bernadine Cistercians, an international order in the Benedictine tradition. We were welcomed to a Taize evening which was being run by one of the sisters leading a 'flute retreat'. That's a first for me – a whole bunch of flautists from all over the country leading this really meditative and prayerful ecumenical occasion. I thought we would be swelling the numbers a little, but no, the chapel was packed! All around the barn of a building, there were lovely icons everywhere and in the service there was a gradual lighting up of candles which suited so well the repetitive chanting, interspersed with those precious moments of silent prayer. From a personal point of view, it was lovely not to have to lead anything myself, but to feel really looked after spiritually, surrounded by those who wanted to be there, to really relax in the presence of our Lord. It was ordered worship but not formal. If you even wanted to have a little sleep, no one would have minded!

Afterwards, I had a hunch that the beautiful icons would have been made by one of the sisters, and I was right. I was introduced to her and delighted to hear how busy she was with commissions for parishes using of course that orthodox tradition of making her work another way of praying – and that too is ordered as well as being skilful & solitary.

In our own times, we have got in a muddle about the word 'icon' – something related to our computers or a word to describe someone we admire, usually a 'celebrity' of some kind? The original Greek meaning is 'image', 'likeness' or 'representation'. And that's what you see on the front of your service sheets today. It isn't painted to scale but it does communicate the great affection between mother and daughter. The larger image of Ann who isn't even mentioned in the Bible is given centre stage, and that is why she has to be centre-stage on the Feast of Mary's nativity.

I don't worry too much about the lack of historical detail or knowledge about Ann or her husband, thought to be called Joachim. The Christian tradition, so called, has always embraced a little imagination and some good storytelling which speaks of God's goodness and grace. The story goes that after many anxious years of not being able to conceive, many lonely times of praying for new birth to come, Ann would weep and pray for at least one infant. One day as she was praying beneath a laurel tree, an angel is said to have appeared to her, declaring that God had heard her prayers. She would indeed have a child who should be praised the world over. Ann replied, 'As my God lives, if I conceive either a boy or a girl, the child shall be a gift to my God, serving him in holiness throughout the whole of its life.' Saint Ann was thought to have given birth to the Blessed Virgin Mary when she was about the age of forty. She and Joachim, according to the tradition, lived to see the birth of Mary's child Jesus, and

Joachim died just after seeing his divine grandchild presented to God in the Jerusalem Temple.

In a County and Diocese that has so many Churches named after the Blessed Virgin Mary, we should be cheered by this and other feast days around her, which lead us to discover more of God's loving purposes for each and every one of us. As Ann is brought into today's sacred story and picture, so are we. We are neither anonymous nor forgotten in God's eyes, but the reverse.

And the second most important thread is the wonderful vocation her child, Mary, took on willingly, bravely, faithfully, and at great cost, right up to the foot of the Cross. The child she nurtured and sang to with her 'Magnificat', also wept tears of sorrow and lament at Christ's end. Today we honour Mary which is quite different from worshipping her. Today we look at and pray through her, looking and praying for us. That's what all icons are for, that two-way conversation and prayer, which makes all meditation and prayer possible, and not only in a monastery or holy place.

It is our duty also to pray for those mothers who have lost their daughters in the world's largest number of wars and environmental tragedies, as well as daughters who have lost their mothers. For those who have not been able to conceive after years of IVF treatment. For those who feel neglected, sad, or left out of the picture, in our own society: God loves them too. The Christian story which is ours now as well as in the past, challenges us to walk humbly and hopefully with

our God. Despite all our failures or disappointments, we are always given a fresh start through the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why every patronal feast draws us to the divine.