St Mary the Virgin – Patronal Festival

Today, here in Weekley, we celebrate the patronal festival of St Mary the Virgin. Since the beginning of the Christian tradition Mary, our patron saint, has been recognised as a special figure in the Christian narrative. The actions and words of saints have often inspired both individuals and whole societies to begin a journey of faith. Mary, the mother of Jesus, is the pinnacle of these saints. Through her we see an example of model parenthood and faithfulness in God. She stands as an example to us all. She is not simply submissive in her role as the mother of Jesus, but also active in her obedience to play the part necessary in God's design for humankind.

Clearly, God is closer to those who desire holiness: God is closer to those who try. Some people live such extraordinarily holy lives that people flock to them in their desire to live more in tune with God too. A really holy person has the ability to pass on some of God's goodness. Because goodness is catching.

Now, it goes without saying that God is everywhere, but when human barriers are lessened or removed He feels closer. To remove such barriers in one's own life takes practice, wisdom, prayer and frequent reflection upon one's own actions. For many of the saints, a lifetime of such faithfulness clearly results in a remarkable ability in this regard. Saints, then, are vessels for God's goodness. Mary's special place in the life of Jesus certainly affords her such status.

Now, before we go much further, we need to think a little more deeply about our understanding of good and evil.

God did not create evil. God did not create evil. It is just that evil is apparent where God is not. And God is Love!

Therefore, so long as we live in love, we live in God and evil cannot come near us.

Let's ponder this truth again. God did not create evil. It is just that evil is apparent where God is not. And God is Love!

God created the world and all the forces in it, but he did not create evil. You may say; but if God created all things; if he created the universe and all the forces within it, God must have also created evil. This is an easy trap to fall into. But it is not the truth. Our God is not an evil God and He certainly does not create evil. God is simply love.

Let's use the example of heat and cold. Modern science would rightly assert that cold is simply the result of a lack of heat. Remove the heat and you feel cold. There is then no such thing as cold except as an expression used to communicate a lack of heat. You cannot bring cold into a hot place. The only way to make a hot place cold is to remove the heat. Exactly the same is true in regards to evil.

Or let us use the example of darkness. Darkness does not exist, because darkness is just a lack of light. Remove the light and things appear dark, but you cannot bring darkness into a light place. The

only way to make a place dark is to actually remove or block-out the light. In like manner, when we consider the concept of good and evil, we find the same to be true. Nothing else makes sense.

God is goodness, God is love. Therefore, the closer to God one is the less evil is felt. In the case of the world, our actions can make God's goodness more apparent, more present, and so reveal God's goodness to a whole host of situations that would otherwise be lacking in it. Now, sometimes this can literally stop bad things from happening by the actions or responses God's goodness inspires us to take. We can stand up to injustice, hardship, oppression. Sometimes God's goodness can even bring about huge change on its own.

But sometimes bad physical situations continue. Sometimes they happen to us and sometimes we see them all over our world. In such situations God's goodness is even more transformative and profound. But instead of transforming a physical outcome, it transforms us psychological and spiritually. This spiritual change can be individual or it can transform whole communities. God's goodness brought into a situation of peril or apparent helplessness can prevent a feeling of complete despair, darkness or evil. Just like when you remove the heat, all around feels cold. Or when you remove the light all around seems dark. Without God's goodness guiding our inner orientation, all around would feel evil and everything would descend into despair and chaos. In contrast, God's goodness transforms all it touches so that nothing seems hopeless anymore. I suddenly realise that the bad things that another individual has done to me are forgivable, the illness that I am suffering can be lived with if not cured, the feeling of loss or bereavement that I am experiencing can be overcome. Because the light banishes the darkness, the heat dispels the cold and God's Goodness eradicates all evil.

Of course, nowhere on Earth has that goodness been more profoundly felt, or that love more greatly expressed, than in the person of Jesus Christ, who was himself God – ultimate goodness, ultimate love. No mere human being could ever come close. Jesus is divine and in him we see goodness, holiness and love in perfect expression. But some of the saints of our church exhibit a level of holiness and obedience that has enabled God's goodness to come close in a profound way too. Some faithful people sitting amongst us today, both old and young, certainly share something of this ability.

But no saint, no mere human, has ever done that nearly as profoundly as the lady who bore our Saviour. St Mary the Virgin is the young woman who suckled him, nurtured him, cradled him, and embraced him. The mother who knew how the script must end and yet did not stand in her beloved son's way – instead faithfully encouraging, supporting, following even as she felt her own heart being pierced as she watched her son sacrificing himself for us on the cross.

In Mary, we see a human woman who is filled with devotion, holiness and love. She is faithful to the end. This is how she can sing in the Magnificat at the beginning of Luke's Gospel – "my soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour"…

Today Mary continues to provide us with a window to the divine through her example and holiness. As such, she remains intimately involved in the building of God's kingdom on earth. In the Gospels, we see

Mary as a significant vessel for the bringing of God's goodness as she becomes the mother of our Lord. Now that she is in heaven, she continues to provide us with an eternal example that radiates that goodness to all those who have the conviction to recognise it. For some of us, it is her part in the Gospel story that provides this example. For others, it is the prayers and support she offers from her place in heaven.

We will always need all the holy help we can get to remove human barriers and allow God's goodness to come close. We will always need good examples if we are ourselves to become spiritually transformed into agents of love. St Mary and God's saints can provide some of that help.

Because evil is only apparent where God is not. And God is Love

R.T. Parker-McGee - 31st August 2014