

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA**

August 13, 2023 – FEAST OF ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

The Rev. Dr. Nina George–Hacker

Sermon: “*Saint Mary the Virgin—Queen of Hearts*”

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| Isaiah 61:10-11 | (The prophet proclaims God is doing new things) |
| Psalms 34:1-9 | (Praise for the Lord's blessings, salvation, and help) |
| Galatians 4:4-7 | (God sent His Son, born of woman, to save us) |
| St. Luke 1:46-55 | (The Virgin Mary magnifies the Lord for all His works) |

On August 15th, The Feast of St. Mary the Virgin is celebrated in all branches of Christ's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church—from Eastern Orthodox to Lutherans. Because Mary is regarded as the greatest of the saints and the first Christian, this annual feast is a celebration of the grace and power of God in human life, and of the extraordinary and marvelous things the Lord can do with a life yielded to Him and receptive to His will. It is also a commemoration of Mary's complete faith and trust in Jesus as her Lord and Savior, He who also was her Child. And, it is a celebration of our own faith in Christ, who has promised that if we serve Him here on earth we shall reign with Him in heaven. In the Church we talk a lot about faith, but how can we easily describe it? The best answer I can give you is Hebrews 11:1: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” (I'll repeat that.) And it is God who gives us that assurance and conviction.

Some years ago, the Rector of the Church of the Annunciation, Marble Arch, London—one of the great traditionalist parishes of the Church of England—began a sermon with an amusing story that bears retelling.*

Father John Millburn was, for nearly 40 years, the Superior of the Society of Mary and Vicar of St. Paul's Church, Brighton. He travelled throughout the Anglican Communion preaching the glories of Mary. The story goes that after his death, he made his way to heaven and came face-to-face with St. Peter. “Your holiness,” he began, “I am Father John Millburn.” Saint Peter checked his list with consternation: Father Millburn's name was not on there. Off went Saint Peter to consult with Our Lord Himself. “There's a priest here who wants to come in, a Father John Millburn.” Immediately, Jesus exclaimed, “Oh, let him in! My Mom's been nagging Me about him for years!” Personally, I'd be glad if Jesus' Mom nagged Him about *me* for years!

Historically, Protestants have resisted the prayer known as the “Hail Mary,” thinking it is a prayer to her. In fact, the prayer cobbles together two bits of Scripture from Gabriel's introduction to Mary, and her cousin Elizabeth's subsequent greeting, with a request for Mary, the Mother of God (because Jesus IS God), to “pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.” We ask family and friends on earth to pray for us, why not ask friends and family in heaven?

Because the Blessed Virgin Mary prayed so close to the throne of grace—as God's presence is referred to in Hebrews 4:16—Christians have believed for 20 centuries that there is no better person than her, to ask to intercede for us anywhere or at any time. And so, getting back to Father Millburn, I'm sure that Mary's prayers for the priest went directly to her Son. For she is a powerful intercessor and a reminder to us that prayer is of vital importance to our souls and bodies, and has eternal implications.

After Christ's ascension into heaven, Mary and the disciples were praying in the Upper Room for the Holy Spirit to come down upon them (Acts 1:12-14). What they were doing doesn't appear to be very noteworthy, at least by the world's standards. Just waiting around seems so passive. But the Bible reminds us that waiting upon the Lord, as Mary did, is of supreme importance in our prayer lives.

As the first Christians soon realized, prayer is the mightiest weapon we have in the spiritual war that we fight daily, because prayer places us in direct communication with the only Power that is higher and greater than us or anything in this world or the universe, the only Power that can deliver us from evil, death, and hell. We would do well to follow Mary in her prayerfulness and patient waiting upon the Lord for the infilling of the Holy Spirit.

If you travel to London's Westminster Abbey, you will see monuments to the builder, to St. Edward the Confessor, Tudor figures, persons from the Reformation and Victorian eras, on down to the venerable war dead, poets, writers, musicians, and statesmen. All the monuments have inscriptions—judgments on the lives those people led. The same may be true of some of the gravestones in any church cemetery, such as St. John's. When encountering these memorials, we are prompted to wonder, "What will people say of us one day?"

With many of the saints, we can easily see their monuments that have remained. Some founded large and important religious orders; others left weighty books and significant teachings. Still others are remembered for a good and wholesome influence, or great works of mercy and charitable institutions. But when it comes to the Virgin Mary, what did she leave as her memorial? Certainly, no religious order, no book, no teaching, no school, or hospital. In her time, she was neither wealthy nor socially influential. By every evaluation or standard you or I might use to assess a person's achievement, Jesus' Mother was unremarkable.

So, why is it that we still gather some two millennia after she lived in a faraway land to remember her, and to pay her honor? Some might say Mary was nothing more than a woman who simply happened to be chosen by God as the Mother of Jesus, God's Word made flesh. What she has left us is not a monument but a *faithful example*. Mary was the first Christian, the first to believe in Jesus and follow Him, the first to trust in His Way—from His cradle to His tomb, and beyond.

The Bible tells us Mary was chosen by God for this unique vocation. Each of us is also chosen by God for specific vocations and works tailored just for us in His great plan for *our* lives. Mary's calling was to give us Jesus, and to be the first believer. God never gives anyone a job or vocation without providing the help to do it, as He did for Mary. Remember: "God doesn't call the equipped. God equips the called." And that is just as true for us today as it was for Mary 2,000 years ago.

Because He called her, God also gave Mary lots of support along the way. He sent her the Archangel Gabriel with assurances directly from heaven; gave her an understanding and caring husband, Joseph; an encouraging cousin, Elizabeth; and later in life, the Apostle John (our parish's patron saint) to care for her after Jesus' death on the Cross. The support, and guidance God gave Mary, He will always give us, too, as He bestows upon us the grace to live out our particular callings. Since Mary was to become the Mother of God the Son, she received *extraordinary* grace which is why the Archangel Gabriel declared her to be "*full of grace*."

As our intercessor and example, Mary goes before the whole people of God, giving all of the baptized an accessible model of what it means to follow Jesus and walk in His steps. If you want to know how to be a Christian, follow Mary, as she listens to her Son and does His will, even when—like her—you may not understand it, or even agree on what that is.

Think about the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11). Mary tells Jesus the household has run out of wine, and His reaction is basically, "What's that got to do with me?" Instead of upbraiding Him, Mary simply says to the servants: "Do whatever He tells you." And of course, you know the rest of the story—Jesus turns jars of wash water into the finest wine imaginable. But in this little family exchange, Mary shows us what it means to be faithful *regardless of the circumstances*. She focused on Jesus and His power, rather than the lack of wine that might ruin the festivities.

We, too, will see better results when, like Mary, we focus on Christ, rather than our circumstances and what's likely to go wrong. Mary experienced total freedom from trying to control everything and everyone, a freedom found in letting God be her leader and guide. We can do the same when we “let go and let God.”

At the Cross, as Mary experienced up-close her Son's suffering and death, she and the Beloved Disciple, St. John—who may have been her nephew—committed themselves to one another in a relationship of mutual dependence on Jesus, one which we Christians still have through the Communion of Saints. Both Mary and St. John depended on Christ because their lives lacked fullest meaning without His. Their identities were determined by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This is actually the goal and purpose of our Baptism: To live out our love for, and commitment to Christ daily, in every relationship and circumstance, just as they did.

In today's Epistle reading (Galatians 4:4-7), St. Paul tells us that “God sent his Son, born of a woman ... in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” As the Mother of Christ, she is our Mother too, because in Jesus we are all God's children, united as sisters and brothers, sons and daughters of God. And because of this, God calls us to love everyone as we would our own flesh-and-blood-family members. For those times when you're having difficulty loving—or even *liking*—someone, ask Jesus' Mom to show you how. And be assured, she will pass that request on to her Son, and He will provide the grace you need.

At her death, as our Anglican collect for today prays, the Blessed Virgin Mary was taken to God to share in His glory. The collect prays that we, too, will share that same glory with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And we *shall*, if we, like her, love Jesus, listen to Him, trust in Him, and obey His will.

Tradition celebrates that when Mary was taken to God, she was crowned Queen of Heaven. However, I truly believe Jesus' Mother would prefer that with love and devotion we crown her Queen of our Hearts, and walk in her ways that must always lead us to her Son. Thanks be to God for Saint Mary the Virgin's faithful prayers and example by which we can be inspired and encouraged. *Amen.*