

Saint Mary the Virgin
August 12, 2007
Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Wednesday of next (this) week is the Feast of St. Mary the Virgin. We won't be celebrating that feast this year at Grace Church because there are no Wednesday services this month. Having said that, I trust I'll not find myself under censure if I share some thoughts with you now about the Blessed Virgin Mary.

There are in this Diocese of New Jersey four parishes dedicated to Mary: Burlington, Haddon Heights, Point Pleasant and Stone Harbor and three Mission Churches: Clementon, Keyport and Pleasantville. In addition, there is a secondary school founded in 1837 by Bishop George Washington Doane as a serious academic institution for young women. It is now a co-educational school, St. Mary's Hall-Doane Academy.

I've had some experience with one of those Parish Churches, St. Mary's, Haddon Heights. I was ordained from that Parish in 1964 and later served there, in various capacities, from 1987-1997. The Parish was incorporated in 1909.

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Another St. Mary's Church for which I feel an attachment is our daughter's parish Church in the village of Goudhurst, Kent, England. It began as a chapel dedicated to St. Mary in the year 1119 during the reign of King Henry I. My affection for that Parish goes back only 13 years, but at Christmas 1996 I was privileged to assist the Vicar in the distribution of the Sacrament at the midnight service. There was something very moving about treading where the saints have trod for almost 900 years, worshipping the same Lord, venerating the same Lady.

In reading the brief history of St. Mary's Haddon Heights and the long history of St. Mary's, Goudhurst, I find no indication of why, each in its own time, dedicated their Parish to the Virgin Mary. There are many, many Episcopal Churches throughout this country named after Mary, some 300 years old, yet it wasn't until the Prayer Book Revision of 1979 that we even included her in our own liturgical celebrations.

Despite that apparent neglect, through the centuries much devotion has claimed many things for Mary which cannot be proved by Holy

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Scripture, but there *are* things we *can* believe and I want to explore briefly with you some thoughts about her and reasons why, I for one, believe it *is* fitting that we do her homage.

There is the gentleness she displayed when her son spoke sharp and unkind words to her, as he often did, when really not understanding what he was about, she continued to support him. For all the sentimentalizing that their relationship has come in for since, there's no place in the Gospels where Jesus spoke some special loving word, or did some special loving thing for the woman who gave him birth. Even at the end, he didn't call her *mother*, just *woman* again, and he didn't say goodbye to her or anything like that. There was her quiet forbearance of his belief that all were his mothers, brothers and sisters. There was the unspoken concept of the *Mater Dolorosa*, the *Mother of Sorrows*, who seeks her son always, and sorrowing.

It is such a basic Christian instinct to revere Jesus, that we need to be reminded over and over again that he *was* fully man. At first thought it seems ridiculous that he should have needed, helplessly, the ordinary attentions of mother to helpless baby, but this is what,

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or part of what is proclaimed by the audacious and almost deliberately shocking title *Mother of God*, the *Theotokos*, in Greek, the God-bearer. If he was to be the central figure in all of our relationships with God, as well as the expression of God's love for all of us, Jesus must be like his brothers and sisters in all things, *in all things but sin*.

So, Mary was a very vital part of the Incarnation. She was with Jesus at various times during his ministry, she was at his crucifixion on Calvary and she was with the apostles at Pentecost as they awaited the coming of the Holy Spirit. Mary is *not* the center of Christianity, to be sure, as some might be accused of making her out to be, but she surely leads directly *to* the center, and more often than not is found *at* the center. And, so it is that the Church invokes her name in liturgy and prayer.

There is in Mary a character and a substance which we might do well to at least try to emulate. Basically it comes down to this: whatever it is that we, you and I, are trying to do in response to God's call, *Mary did it perfectly*. She was totally emptied of pride

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and self-seeking. She was the perfect and clear model for whatever it is that we are called to and to be. When Mary's question, *how can this be done?* (Lk. 1:34) was answered with the assurance that it would be done through the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 35), she received the Holy Spirit without further question and in so doing made it possible for the Incarnate God to be born and walk on this earth. Only through her consenting love could the Word become Flesh. Mary's glory consists, not so much in anything she herself did, but in the fact that she was totally receptive to what God wanted to do. In the words of Luke's Magnificat, *My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed* (Lk. 1: 46-48 NRSV). She is the arch-type and sign of responsiveness and fidelity to the Word who seeks, through the Holy Spirit, to dwell at the very heart of human life. And, in this sense, Mary is truly a symbol of the Church, that enduring community of women and men who are ready, in the words of Luke, *to receive the Word of God and keep it* (Lk. 11:28).

AMEN.