

Feast of St Mary  
Bruton Parish Church  
The Rev. John Maxwell Kerr  
Sunday, August 15, 2010

What a very great privilege to be invited to preach on the Feast of St Mary on the very day we bid adieu to Mary Douglas Turner, our Mollie. One simply cannot find the words to say how truly grateful one is for this opportunity. It is an opportunity I value greatly; an opportunity to make a potentially sad day into one through which we may work together for our mutual growth in faith.

Additional pleasure is that we here at Bruton are actually keeping an important Feast of the Church, St Mary's Day, having prised our death-grip off the ordinary readings prescribed by the Revised Common Lectionary, readings which seem often to have been put together by the stunningly insensitive members of a committee of dull liturgical drones.

Mary, mother of our Lord, is so often portrayed as Mother Mary meek and mild by those who have never read the Gospel. A gentle, sadly smiling but essentially characterless lady in a pretty blue cloak. She may have shown a degree of diffidence when confronted by the archangel Gabriel. Frankly, if I had, and I daresay, if you had, been confronted by an angel as Mary was at the Annunciation we would have fainted dead away. She did not.

Instead, our Lady shows the stuff of which she is made. Mary, mother of our Lord, theotokos in Greek, God-bearer, is a rather robust prophet in her own right, though we too seldom seem to recognize this.

The Gospel reading is very familiar: it even has a name: the Magnificat. Mary begins, as all we who pray or prophesy always should, by praising God, noticing the glory that shines 'round about us.

"My soul magnifies the Lord." Then she goes on: you have the lesson before you in print. Look! This is true prophecy: Mary points to the glorious presence of God not just in her life at this crucial moment but **ALWAYS!** The Old Testament and Epistle readings and today's psalm harmoniously say the same.

Because this is Bruton Parish Church, we clergy can be confident that everybody knows that biblical prophets do not predict the future. They point to the gap between the way things are, thanks to human sin, and the way things should be - the glorious purpose God has for us all. Being a prophet is not being a soothsayer: it is, as folk said in the sixties of the Old Century - well not me personally but you might have used this phrase - to tell it like it is.

The prophet Mary is a witness to God's vision for the poor and powerless of this world. Of course God's vision is not our vision: we seldom wake up in the morning singing the Magnificat determined to do something about bringing the vision to fruition. We cloak and cloud God's vision with our shrunken ideologies misrepresenting Mary.

Not to say yes to God's Gospel vision is to decline our calling and the Church exists to a fair old extent to say so to such a failure. Our calling as Christians, in the broken world Christ died to redeem, is to be true to the vision we have before us in

the Gospel. Those made uncomfortable by this vision can do three things, sometimes all three at once: deny that's what Jesus said, or that he mis-spoke; did not say what he meant, or they can just stop listening. Don't worry: those who are doing so are not alone. Huge numbers of those who claim to be Christians can't hear Christ because they can't bear to. They have a secret slogan: "Don't let Christ or His mother disturb your spiritual slumber!"

Walter Brueggeman, one of the most important theologians alive in America, spotted our self-willed blindness when he wrote: the characteristic ideology of this age is the desire to live the uncalled life. A moment's honest introspection will tell you that it's true.

Mary, gloriously, did not decline her call and ours. For that, the Church has never ceased to give thanks on behalf of all humankind. What's more, instead of ducking out and hiding behind what might have been more comfortable, she said, "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord." She accepted her calling wholeheartedly.

And then we are told, she declaimed the Magnificat.

Down the centuries, many Christians have venerated Mary for her prophetic act in accepting her calling. There is a famous prayer known to many Christians, it begins "Ave Maria" and you may know some of the many beautiful musical settings it has inspired. In English this prayer begins, "Hail Mary", but too many people think that describes a forward pass by a desperate quarterback in what we here, almost alone in the world, are pleased to call 'football'.

The actual prayer says, "Hail Mary, full of grace: the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death."

Millions of Christians have tried to express their gratitude for Mary's acceptance of her calling, for Mary's saying YES to the message of the angel. And they have done so through this prayer. How do we say thank you to God for Mary? Today we keep the Feast of St Mary, honouring her and her calling, thanking God for this woman's prophetic courage and faith.

But there is one more thing to say. Prophecy is not necessarily a matter of saying things, or even doing things. Prophecy can also be a matter of just being there. Being present, being seen and known to be a symbol of God's vision.

And this brings me to my friend and colleague, best of friends and most collegial of colleagues, Mollie, the Reverend Mary Douglas Turner, who has lived up to her Christian name, Mary.

By just being here, as well as by being such a phenomenally brilliant priest over the years, Mollie has been a prophet authentically living out God's calling in our midst.

Being the one to bear the weight of the glory of God in a new way, in an historically unique way, need not be entirely comfortable, as she found out. Being a woman called and ordained to be a priest in the Episcopal Church is still, to this day, not entirely comfortable. Easier to duck it. Easier not to dig in and pray God to help one find the spiritual strength and courage to carry on. Easier to leave the preaching,

pastoral care and prophetic presence of Christ's call to old white men like those of us who will remain in the Bruton clergy team.

You know and I know that it is just true that in many situations, women are more comfortable talking to a woman priest pastorally than to a man and men find confessing their problems man-to-man to be easier. We've proved the truth of this for ten years. Now what? Now what?

Back to prophecy. The love and faith and frank courage that Mary, mother of our Lord, showed once, so many centuries ago, has been the inspiration of the calling of women serving God in the Church ever since. The ministry of women is unique and completes the ministry God is calling forth in God's Church.

When our Mollie steps graciously aside, she will be providing a challenge and an opportunity for all the women in this parish and it has been to you that I have been speaking this day. Unless we appoint a women priest to Bruton Parish, there will be a terrible gap, a lack; but it is one which can be partially made up by the women of this parish. No-one else can fulfill that calling to ministry; neither Charles, nor me, nor Ron, nor the New Rector, should that be merely a man. Mary's prophecy, the response to her calling, constantly remains before the Church as a symbol and a sign.

Mollie's prophetic presence remains before the Church as a symbol and a sign of justice in the inclusive ministry of Christ's Church.

The women of Bruton Parish must echo Mary's response to God, magnifying the Lord for the ministry and calling God has shown us to be possible, thanking God for the blessings we have all received. The women of Bruton are called to continue the ministry of Mollie, Mary Douglas Turner, keeping that bright flame of womens' ministry alight. But not only the women: all of us are called to magnify the Holy Name of God: that is our common calling. All of us are called to allow our spirits to rejoice in God our Saviour. For God has indeed looked with favour upon us, upon the lowliness of God's servants, by blessing us with the ministry of a truly splendid priest called Mary. Thanks be to God! Amen.

JM Kerr