

His mercy is on them that fear him through all generations'

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We don't know the exact year when St Diama arrived here, on this hill overlooking the Evenlode and said 'yes: here is the place. Here we will build our church'. Since then the history of this place has been a series of 'yesses' to the purposes of God. It is not a bad definition of a church- a place where people come to say yes to God.

Of course, we might dispute some of the yesses. Either their wisdom or whether they were really divinely inspired. Was the 16th century Vicar Dr King, right to say yes to Henry VIII and accept his invitation to become first bishop of Oxford? Was he right to then change sides again and say yes to sit as judge in the trial which burned Thomas Cranmer? He perhaps serves as a reminder that our yesses ought not to be for our own advancement or even for the immediate needs of the time, but for the purposes of God's kingdom, set on a timescale beyond our knowing.

Still we might be thankful for the yes of another vicar, Dr Hutchinson, who - charlbury's yesses shaping the life of England, and indeed the entire English speaking world, as a whole.

Each Sunday morning I give thanks for Dr Brabourne, who said yes to a new peal of bells in 1716. On them were written 'God preserve the Church of England' a prayer we might find ourselves justifiably keen to say today, 'Peace and Good Neighbourhood' a salutary statement that recalls how lucky they believed themselves to be- in living memory of the evils of the Civil War- to be living in peace, and how fortunate we remain today , and 'prosperity to this town and parish'. A reminder the life of this place and the life of this town are inevitably intertwined.

That is a further underlined in the Memorial Chapel, where there is the town's tribute to those Men who went to war and did not come back again- a reminder that saying yes has its sacrifices.

The history of this place over 1400 years has been varied, with thousands of characters. What we do know, and what we give thanks for today is that they all said yes. That is the story of this place, of St Mary's. We have been the very heart of this town from before it even was a town. And the thing which draws us stream of saying yes to God. That will continue for as long as there is a Charlbury, people will gather here to say yes. But our own small part of all that is today when we celebrate our patronal festival, when we come to say yes to God.

Now because of some of those past yesses we have patrons in two senses. We have our patron in the form of St John's College. They appoint our vicars and give other forms of practical support. But we have another patron as well, a heavenly patron. A holy person, a saint to whom this church is particularly dedicated and to whose example we look.

That patron is the blessed Virgin Mary. The mother of our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. She who bore him in her womb. A woman picked out of seeming obscurity to quite literally bear God. But this required something from her- a yes. 'Be it unto me according to thy word' as the prayer said in her name has it. We heard her extended yes to bearing Jesus in our reading today- the passage of text from Luke known as the Magnificat.

It is still said and occasionally sung in this church almost every single day at Evening Prayer, in the glorious translation of the Book of Common Prayer, beginning 'my soul doth magnify the Lord'. In those words, she, who was the first person to know and love Jesus Christ and knew and love him in the deepest way possible, as his blessed Mother, she encapsulated what it would mean to be a Christian. It is our calling to magnify the Lord, to sing daily of his joy and grace and to draw attention to his deeds of power and love. To point, always and ever, to the fact the he in his son, is with us always.

Mary continues by singing that 'He that is mighty hath magnified me, and holy is his name.' At the heart of all we do is this- we might seek to magnify God here, to make the most of him, to speak authentically and truly of the fact that he is perfect love. But we do so because God first loved us. the message of the life and witness of the Blessed Virgin Mary is that this God seeks us out, God says yes to us first, and in the glorious incarnation, God magnifies us before we magnify him.

By the witness of Mary, by the joy and miracle of the incarnation, God becoming man, our humanity is totally transformed. We are changed from those bound entirely by the cycles of the world, by the limitations of our fallen and often wicked humanity, into people whose task it is to say yes. Yes to one another, yes to our common life and yes to God. Yes to life and yes to grace and yes to love.

That then is the task which our heavenly patron sets us. Saying yes. Not because it is nice, certainly not because it is easy, but because it is the only possible answer to the grace and love of an all abundant and all loving God.

Mary sings 'For behold that henceforth, all generations shall call me blessed': she was right. We continue to bless her holy name, in our words and worship here. But perhaps the best way we, in our generation, might continue to show that she is blessed, is to live out the legacy of her son. To be people of love and light and truth. To be people who see the great and loving deeds of God and say 'yes'.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.