

PATRONAL FESTIVAL, GREAT BEALINGS: 8.9.24

As I hope the beautiful icon on the front of your service booklets illustrate, today's Festival is all about 2 people in particular, two great Saints of the Church, Ann and Mary, Mother and daughter. They both saw, witnessed and loved the living Christ, the very foundation stone of the word 'Church' or, 'Christian'. We sometimes get so distracted by the Church as a historical building or place of sanctuary, that we forget it is formed and shaped by people, by their devotion and sacrifice to serve their Lord, and Ours.

Unfortunately too, in a County where nearly every Church seems to be named after the Mother of Jesus, we can forget those everyday bonds and ties which must have existed between very ordinary people, people just like you and me!

Although the Bible tells us nothing about the parents of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Christian tradition has attributed to them the names of Joachim and Ann and has filled up the story of their lives.

Joachim is said to have been born at Nazareth and married Ann when he was still a young man. For many years they gave birth to no child, and sometimes he was publicly mocked for this. In a last prayer for a child he withdrew to the wilderness and there he fasted for 40 days.

Ann's father is said to have been a nomadic Jew named Akar, who brought his wife to Nazareth for their daughter's birth. Ann too, after her marriage to Joachim, was saddened by their lack of a child. She would weep and pray for at least one infant. One day as she was praying beneath a laurel tree, an angel is said to have appeared to her, declaring that God had heard her prayers. She would indeed have a child who should be praised the world over. Ann replied, 'As my God lives, if I conceive either a boy or a girl, the child shall be a gift to my God, serving him in holiness throughout the whole of its life.'

St Ann gave birth to the Blessed Virgin Mary when she was about the age of 40. She and Joachim, according to the tradition, lived to see the birth of Mary's child Jesus, and Joachim died just after seeing his divine grandchild presented to God in the Jerusalem Temple.

There are so many missing details but that doesn't worry the icon artist. When we hear the word misused today, 'He's an icon' or, 'She's a national treasure' we are obsessed with 'celebrities' – like Taylor Swift, Dame Judy Dench, or those Gallagher brothers ,Oasis, who have, it seems not just 'fame' but

economic control over all of us. So these two so-called 'pop icons', who for the last 15 years have not even spoken civilly to one another, are now assured of a very comfortable retirement plan! Is it no wonder that that our religious icon is failing to change the way we look at and understand the mirror image, the reflection of God's beauty and God's affection between mother and child, or mother and son – just look closely at those hands of embrace, the way Ann protects Mary and the way Mary communicates her affection, with a flower.

Now just last week I happened to be travelling home from my visit to the Hold, in Ipswich, the lovely new home for Suffolk's archives – but at the wrong time!

I encountered this 'sea of blue' T-shirts and children fleeing their first day back at Kesgrave High School and I kid you not, everyone was clutching a mobile phone. Perhaps they are confiscated in the day and when school is over, they can start texting again, sending stuff or receiving stuff. Not a Mars Bar or ice cream in sight, but instead the life-saver of a mobile with its myriad of images, many of them disturbing, many of them spreading false messages and untruth – which is why their teachers have to address 'cyber bullying' on a daily basis. Rather than pondering an image slowly and thoughtfully like our one of Ann and Mary, parents are right to worry about their children being manipulated or exploited.

But if you go into a Greek monastery as I have or, an Orthodox shrine in Krakow, and see people eager to light a candle before their favourite icon, their hands are free to be still, to pray, to contemplate – and most of all to see God speaking to us through the stillness of the icon and the sheer serenity of the image, that 'bonding' as I call it, that partnership of radiant love and longing each for the other.

Isn't that partnership the source and *raison d'être* of different churches or traditions or places coming together in the first place? And actually saying, 'YES' like Mary, in our famous Gospel reading today, to serve God and one another is a thrilling vocation and adventurous calling?

As we have just sung, the icon dances in tune: "Tell out my soul, the greatness of the Lord to children's children and forevermore!" Instead of the instant gratification of so many different images on our phones, let's just put them down and stop in order to see more clearly why the Church needs to concentrate on people first of all who each have a part to play in God's

communicating with us, and leading us into more fruitful relationships. This is something we will think through some more on our shared Quiet Day at 'Fram' College but as the Chaplain said to me, 'Please don't come along if you don't want to be visited by the Holy Spirit that Wednesday! Isn't that what St Paul dared to say in our Reading from Romans today: "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God."

So on this Festival Day, pray that our Patron, Mary, and the mother who bore her, Ann, will continue to encourage us to be strong in faith and constant in love and devotion: to the One who made us so ordinary and so special – in His divine image.