Sunday, 11 September 2016
Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary (trans.)

There’s a story from the Orthodox church about a man who asked a monk, “If God is everywhere, then what do I go to church for?” The monk was silent for a moment, and then replied, “The whole atmosphere is filled with water; but when you want to drink, you go to a fountain.”

Today we celebrate the nurturing love of Church as we celebrate the birthday of Mary, mother of Jesus, patron of this parish. I’m afraid we didn’t sing ‘Happy Birthday to You’ for our opening hymn—because we’re not celebrate the date of Mary’s birth, but the feast of the birth of our patroness.

For those who are curious, the date for this week’s feast once fell (in the older, Julian calendar) on the autumn equinox. The other great Marian feast, the Feast of the Annunciation, falls on the spring equinox. And nine months later, of course, is her son’s natal feast—Christmas—falling at the winter solstice, the time from which the light grows and grows. And on the summer solstice, days diminishing so that the light may grow again at Christmas? John the Baptist’s natal feast—Jesus’ cousin and forerunner, the older child at the bottom of Douglas Jeal’s wonderful sculpture which we bless today. But already, I digress. Remember the water in the atmosphere? Ralph Waldo Emerson liked to point out, "The good rain, like the bad preacher, does not know when to leave off."

One of the feasts of Mary which I haven’t mentioned is the one which falls nine months before Mary’s natal feast—the feast of the conception of Mary. In the Roman

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1 Whether this is actually an Orthodox tale of any antiquity is rather unlikely; it is, however, a rather current Facebook meme.
Catholic tradition, the Immaculate Conception, ‘immaculate’ meaning, at its simplest and least baroque, that from the moment of Mary’s conception Mary already took part in the grace which the rest of us don’t receive until baptism. But all too often this aspect of Marian theology raises her up so far beyond ordinary mortals that she is barely recognisable as human.

What I love about Mary is Mary’s ordinariness. Mary is ordinary. She is a poor Jewish woman of first century Roman Palestine, an unwed mother and homeless refugee. You can see her here in Jeal’s sculpture—a very ordinary young woman, her hair up in a ponytail. An ordinary woman made of ordinary stuff, but a woman of many facets, many sides.

Mary the poet—we sing her magnificat, sometimes with joy, sometimes in wonder, sometimes in quiet contemplation, sometimes crying for justice, every time we celebrate Evensong. Mary the working woman. Mary the mother, the wife, the widow. Mary the prophet, Mary the disciple.

Mary the ordinary; in a broken world of displacement, poverty and violence and misogyny, Mary is so very ordinary.

She is also an ordinary—as a diocesan bishop is the ordinary of a diocese⁴, Mary is the ordinary to the church in the same way that something can be bog standard and the standard. And her standards—think medieval banners here, as well the standards of measurement cast in iron outside the Greenwich Observatory—are the standards to which we are held, as Christians, as Church.

Mary’s first great standard is Theotokos—God-bearer, Mother of God, a title Mary has borne since The Council of Ephesus in 431 (and therefore one which the English church, before and after the Reformation, has held to). It is so much of a better title

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² Which leads to a wonderful title—the visiting bishop to a monastery or convent is The Ordinary to the Peculiar.
than The Blessed Virgin Mary—as if her virginity is the most interesting, or even most meaningful, part about her.

Mary is Theotokos, God-bearer—and her standard is ours as well, for at your baptism, we celebrated the Word of God alive in you. Will you, like Mary, be bringing Christ into the world?

Mary’s second great standard by which we are measured, is again a standard waving colourfully above the crowd, a standard by which all might navigate. As she is depicted in the icon outside our St. Andrew’s Chapel, where visitors from around the world light candles and leave their prayers, Mary is Hodegetria, ‘The one who shows the Way’— and in the icon you can see her pointing to Christ, the Way.

As a Church, we are charged to be Hodegetria, to point the Way to Christ, to welcome in every visitor and newcomer, to sit and listen to the stranger, the homeless, the tourist and wayfarer. For the last eight hundred years and more Great St. Mary’s has been here by the Market Square to point the way—not just the way to King’s Chapel or the public restrooms in the Market Square, but the way to the Way, the Truth, the Life. In our lives — as individuals, as a congregation—in art, in action, in works of mercy and justice, in patient conversation, how well are we being Hodegetria, the ones who point the way?

And finally, in Douglas Jeal’s work, which we will bless today, we see Mary as Madonna Lactans, Our Lady nursing—in the Orthodox Church, Galaktotrophousa, the Milk-giver. A celebration of her love and nurturing—even as we are nurtured at Church, drinking deep from the fountain of faith—and a rejection of any theology that makes Jesus less than fully human, whether that is the monophysitism of antiquity, or the contemporary evangelical Superman muscular Jesus.

Mary helps us to see Jesus as a human being, hungry, vulnerable, cradled by his young peasant mother. And Mary calls the church to nurture the vulnerable, to feed the hungry, to shelter the homeless poor. When we open the doors of the church on winter nights, as part of the Cambridge Churches Homeless Project, Great St Mary’s strives to follow the standard of Mary, Galaktotrophousa.

Milk-giver, Wayfinder, God-bearer. In grief and sorrow, in joy and prayer, in her song of justice, in her silent vigil at the Cross, in her life-giving love, Mary shows us what it is
to be Church. Today, this birthday party for Mary, we celebrate the God-bearer, the nurturing one, the one who points the way, this ordinary woman.

Today, at this birthday party for Mary we celebrate the Church universal—in all her ordinary flaws, in her sorrow and her joy, in the potential spread abundantly before us.

Today, at this birthday party for Mary at Great St Mary’s, we celebrate our parish—our eight centuries and more of prayer, scholarship, and radical welcome; the majesty of these ancient timbers and stones, and the greater majesty of the God whom we serve.

Beyond these doors—and here in these pews and this pulpit—the world seems a mess, infected by fear, violence, and racism; and we are lost in its midst, hungry and broken. But a standard was raised two thousand years ago, an ordinary standard, simple and clear, shining through the fog of fear, showing us to the Way, the Way to which Mary points, the Way that Great St Mary’s has pointed to these last eight centuries and more.

An ordinary Way, a Way that God himself has walked for us, a way whose stones have been worn smooth, by women like Mary, by the countless saints who have gone before us, singing their Magnificat to the God of Love.

Come, walk with Mary—come, walk with Great St Mary’s—along the Way.