

I love Patronal Festivals, they are an excuse to rejoice, to sprinkle holy water and to celebrate and to be thankful for our lives together here at St. Mary's. This is my fifth Patronal in Prestwich and I can't but help reflect on the blessings of God to us in these five years and to ponder on the role of Mary herself in all that has happened to us.

When I first came here I found a parish that was tired and weary, a community of people who loved this church and were glad to be part of it but who expected the narrative of decline to dictate the future. I lost count of the people who told me that it was inevitable that congregations would shrink, that young people weren't interested in faith and that buildings like this were impossible to make warm. I sensed that God had other ideas and that's why I wanted to come here and serve as your priest, I like shaking things up.

It's good to remind ourselves that now 250 people a week worship in this church compared to 100 five years ago. We are now financially solvent compared to an annual deficit of over £20,000 per year (and this had been the case for over a decade). We have two youth groups, a flourishing junior church, a Bible study group, a meditation group and all sorts of social groups to bring us together. We are overwhelmed with baptisms and we have more vocations and candidates for confirmation than we have had for decades. This church is full of life and we should thank God for it and all of it is a gift from God and a blessing to us.

When he was Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams said that 'it is the job of the church to find out what the Holy Spirit is doing and to join in'. I believe that it is the call of God to us all, to join in, to fully immerse ourselves in the life God invites us to and to say yes to God whenever he calls us. That is exactly what we have tried to do over these past five years, we have really listened to God and we have said yes when the holy spirit has come upon us. We are called to be risk takers, adventurers and pioneers and that is why this church has grown because we have answered the call of the God who disrupts and disturbs.

There are two things that I love about Mary and the first is her 'yes' to God. The Angel Gabriel came along as God's messenger and delivered God's invitation to her to be the God bearer, to be the mother of Jesus. Mary said yes to this disrupting, disturbing and dangerous invitation. God goes on disrupting our lives with his call in just the same way. Like Mary we are invited to be risk takers, holding nothing back, following the most unexpected and unsought vocations of all kinds. And when we say yes our lives are filled with adventure and good things happen.

The second thing I love about Mary is that the tradition teaches that she prays for us in heaven. I love that image of Mary sitting at the feet of Christ in heaven and praying for you and for me. Every time I preside at the Eucharist I imagine that Mary is standing beside me, I image her touching the holy vessels and quietly praying these ancient words alongside me. I feel a real solidarity with her, I know she prays for me and I know that her prayers strengthen my desire to know God and do his will. So today, our souls should also magnify the lord in thankfulness for Mary, in thankfulness for this church and in thankfulness that God is at work here and now and we should expect to be disrupted and to delight in it.