LICENSING OF MARY STYLES (Bishop Simon's sermon during the service, 27.07.26)

The book of Psalms uses a striking verb. It asks us to 'magnify' God. Have you stopped to think about that? How do you magnify, that is, make bigger, the God we worship? Perhaps it speaks to our instinct to think of God as much smaller than he is because this is the only way our brains can cope. As the U2 lyric goes: 'stop helping God across the road'. If this universe is created, which we believe it is, how powerful must you be to make something 93 billion light years across? And that's only the stuff we know about. In Psalm 33 it says: 'by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth'. If God created the universe by breathing out a word, how much more is he capable of?

Now try to imagine one of the world's strongmen political leaders having the power of almighty God for a day. You can take your pick; there are plenty of them across the world. Then think of the tendency of these people to be vain, spiteful and self-enriching; to dispose of people who challenge them, to exercise that power arbitrarily, leaving people permanently anxious and insecure, unable even to criticise the leader online or in private in case the secret police comes after them. Douglas Coupland, the Canadian author of *Generation X*, said his greatest fear in life is that God exists but that he's actually really nasty. It was a telling observation, a mash up of the worst human leaders on the throne of God.

All this gives us a new perspective on the God of our Lord Jesus Christ. So, thanks be to God that his almighty power is instead shown in his everlasting love for us. And he reveals himself in surprising ways in Jesus. As a baby, as a child refugee, as an anonymous manual worker, as a miracle man, for sure, but the dominant image we have of this all powerful God is of him crucified in weakness as a slave in a distant outpost of the Roman empire. This is a God who chooses to be a loving servant, not a malignant autocrat. And he asks his followers to be the same.

This is demonstrated in the beautiful description of Christian character in Colossians 3. St Paul talks about compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience and forgiveness. Yet each of these virtues is under threat in the contemporary world of self-promotion. People think that being meek turns you into a doormat that others can walk over. Far better to assert your own will and get what you want in life. People who hold back are not praised. The art of forgiveness is less practised, too. Fewer people admit to being wrong, which makes it harder for other people to forgive them. Fewer people seem willing to forgive, too, which makes people reluctant to say sorry because they know there will be no release for them. It is a vicious circle that poisons the nation.

We live in this wider culture, which means we are also influenced by it and we need the self-awareness to admit it. Churches often exhibit the same failings, but we cannot surrender to this as an inevitability. Mary chose two wonderful Bible passages tonight, showing how aspirational she is, and also how honest she is. Mary knows she doesn't always live up to the prose of St Paul. Who does? But she knows the writers of the New Testament have something else to say.

Those who trust in Christ are called to be bearers of his image; to demonstrate the new creation he is forming in his resurrection. We can't do this by ourselves, but we can when we are filled with the Holy Spirit. There is no greater prayer to offer each day than asking God to fill us again with the Holy Spirit. We can't pour the Spirit into our hearts,

but we can ensure our hearts are open to this pouring through our desire. And when we are filled with the Spirit, we can show God's love in lots of practical ways.

As Mary begins her ministry here, I would encourage her to hit the ground listening. God has been at work in this church and this parish since they were formed. Understanding that story takes time and bears dividends. And I would ask the church to listen carefully to Mary, because God has led her to this place and has given her much wisdom to share. Mutual listening gets us beyond the cheap and lazy human tendency to size people up immediately and never change our opinion of them because we can't accept we might have been wrong in the first place. It takes time to forge deep and lasting relationships, but devoting this time is worth it.

The same is true of the wider parish, which is your shared mission field. It isn't always the first, the loudest or the most insistent voices we need to hear, but those whose are rarely heard because they aren't pushy or are simply too demoralised by life to speak up. In talking about the Messiah, the prophet Isaiah says: 'he will not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street…a dimly burning wick he will not quench'. Jesus himself inhabits the quietest voices that are drowned out by more entitled people. Find these people in your parish, and you will find the Lord waiting for you.

In Psalm 33 it calls on us to 'sing to him a new song'. It's a refrain heard throughout the Bible. There are always new songs to be sung. You may not be musical but most of the music God is looking for is found in the daily actions of those who choose to follow this all-powerful God in his desire to be a loving servant to the people around. We take the Spirit-enabled virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience to create a tune for others to hear. Lots of modern music is remixed. And the new song we sing for God is always a remix of the love that God breathes out in the gentle expression of his unfathomable power.

For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.