

# St Edmundsbury Cathedral



The Blessed Virgin Mary  
17<sup>th</sup> August 2025 (transferred from 15<sup>th</sup> August)  
St Edmundsbury Cathedral  
Sermon by the Revd Canon Katy Cunliffe

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In 2007, Graham Kendrick wrote a worship song called 'What's to be done about Mary?' I'm not proposing that we sing it – but it is a great question for all of us to consider. Just who is this Mary that we celebrate today? What does she have to say to us here and now? What are we to do with her?

The Mary we're probably all most familiar and most comfortable with is the young girl, draped in a blue sheet, holding a doll and starring in the nativity play at Christmas.

The naïve and innocent Mary we hear about in the Christmas song, 'Mary, did you know?'

The Mary that exists in many places – a pale, plaster statue.

Now, there isn't necessarily anything wrong with that Mary. But I'm not sure how helpful an image it is. Because, if we're not careful, we come to see Mary as being rather pale and pasty like the statue. We see Mary as naïve and innocent, meek and mild, passive and restrained.

What's more, if Mary is then held up as some sort of ideal woman we end up with a narrative that says all women should be meek and mild, passive and restrained. Now I realise you're all still getting to know me but for the avoidance of any doubt, let me be clear that that's not a narrative that sits well with me! It's not one I'm prepared to accept. But more importantly, I don't think that's really who Mary was.

So, instead, the Mary I want to talk to you about today - the Mary I want us to celebrate today – is not meek and mild, passive and restrained. Rather, she is strong, resilient and joyful; she is maybe a bit feisty and outspoken. This is a very real, human, Mary who was confronted with extraordinary events throughout her life and yet remained faithful to God through them all.

This is a Mary who grew up in a volatile and oppressed Nazareth under Roman occupation. A young peasant woman, engaged to a carpenter named Joseph.

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This is a Mary who when told by an angel that she would become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, said 'yes' to God's call, despite the risk involved in being pregnant out of wedlock.

This is a Mary who's 'yes' to God's call is joyful and celebratory! Her response is to sing a joyful, strident and active hymn of praise to God. *My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.*

We heard Mary's song, the Magnificat, as our Gospel reading this morning and it is sung or said each and every day at Evensong or Evening Prayer in this Cathedral and in churches and cathedrals everywhere.

In it, Mary summarises the hope of salvation that is to be realised in the coming of Christ.

In it, we see Mary's acceptance of her vocation; her joy and wonder that God has chosen her of all people – a young, poor, lowly, voiceless girl. *He has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.* But Mary also sings that God's favour, God's mercy, isn't just for her; it is for all people: *God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.* It is also for us. And so we, like Mary, first and foremost, above all else, must sing praise God.

Next, Mary sets out the upside down, topsy turvy values of God: *the proud are scattered, the powerful are brought down from their thrones, the lowly are lifted up, the hungry are filled and the rich are sent away empty.* This lowly, unimportant woman from Nazareth who is about to become the mother of the Messiah, articulates here the yearnings of the poor and oppressed. She refuses, in God's name, to accept injustice.

Here, Mary should unsettle us and make us feel uncomfortable; we should constantly be asking ourselves where we are in this topsy-turvy kingdom; do we treat other people in accordance with these topsy- turvy values. Mary should inspire us to speak out; like her, we should refuse, in God's name, to accept injustice.

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The Magnificat concludes with Mary reminding us of God's faithfulness in keeping promises: her child about to be born, the Messiah, is the fulfilment of God's promise to Abraham that through his descendants, all nations will be blessed.

The Mary who sings the Magnificat is full of joy and wonder. She may be lowly and oppressed but God has called her to be the mother of Jesus Christ and she responds by praising God, by proclaiming justice, and by remembering God's faithfulness.

That would be a nice place to finish wouldn't it? But to do so would be neglecting a large part of who Mary is. Because her story doesn't end with the magnificat. Mary's joy and faithfulness are going to be pushed to the limits.

Because this is a Mary who, after the birth of Jesus, became a refugee; one of the millions throughout the centuries and continuing today, who flee their homes to escape brutality and persecution.

This is a Mary who was a Jewish mother, raising Jesus and possibly other children, to learn about God and to grow in faith. A mother who was frantic with worry when the 12 year old Jesus went missing, who told Jesus off only to have him answer back and rebuke her! A mother who could sometimes be a bit pushy – when they ran out of wine at the wedding of Cana, she urged Jesus to solve the problem! A mother who knew her relationship with her son would always take second place to his relationship with his Father God.

This is a Mary who sometimes had to face the anger of her neighbours when Jesus caused a storm in the synagogue by claiming to be the fulfilment of prophecy. A Mary who could see that the things Jesus was saying and doing were upsetting people and who knew that there would be consequences.

And, of course, there were. This is a Mary who wept at the cross as she watched her son die a painful and humiliating death.

Yet this is a Mary who, through all of this, remained faithful to God.

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When we remember and celebrate Mary we must reclaim her as this remarkable, strong woman who was confronted with extraordinary events in her life and remained faithful to God through them all, resulting in salvation for all through her son, Jesus Christ.

This is a Mary who can be a source of courage and inspiration to us through the highs and lows of our lives.

So may we, like Mary, respond to God's call with joy.

May we sing praise to God above all else.

May we speak out and refuse to accept injustice.

May we remember God's faithfulness to us and may we be faithful to God through the highs and the lows of our lives.

And, like Mary, may the result of our faithfulness be salvation for all through Jesus Christ.

Amen.