A sermon preached by Revd Sylvia Roberts at Holy Trinity Church, South Wimbledon on 15 August 2004 - The Feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary

I'm sure there can't be many people here who don't know who Uncle Albert is in the BBC TV programme "Only Fools and Horses" - and if you don't know him, you'll know that he needs very little encouragement to hark back to his wartime experiences.

Hardly have the words "During the war..." left his lips before everyone in sight howls him into silence. They've heard that phrase too often and don't want to listen again. In our house it's "Now when I was in the army..." and all the younger generation shout "Dad, please!" and leave hastily.

Now, when I was a teacher... the phrase we most dreaded was "In my last school..." so I realise today I'm taking a risk as Vicar of St John's to say "When I was in Southampton... and when I was at St Mary's Southampton..." but there we are - I've said it now!

When I was at St Mary's, Southampton the special feast day for our Patron, the Blessed Virgin Mary, was always on 8th September so we always started the Autumn wonderfully, celebrating our Patronal Festival and thinking in many ways about Mary the Mother of Jesus.

For all sorts of reasons to do with the 'new' Common Worship calendar, the main feast day of celebration for Mary has been moved to August 15th. So here we are together with all those churches named for St Mary celebrating the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary today.

Most of you will know that 28 of us from the South Wimbledon churches have spent this last week in Northumberland visiting the holy sites connected with the early flowering of Christianity in this country - the Holy Island of Lindisfarne, the site of the chapel of St Aiden at Bamburgh and the final resting place of the body of the sainted Cuthbert at Durham Cathedral.

And when we were in Durham Cathedral on Friday morning I saw again one of the symbols of the Christian faith which I find particularly moving and that is the pelican! Some of you may be surprised to hear me say this about this large and ungainly bird who can sometimes be seen to be a bit of a comic figure. But in Christian mythology and in heraldry the pelican has evolved as quite a mythic figure. The pelican is mentioned in Psalm 102, which in the Authorised Version says "Hear my prayer O Lord and let my cry come unto thee; I am like a pelican of the wilderness, like an owl of the desert."

The pelican at Durham is the lectern. Not a large brass eagle but a great outspread pelican with her chicks at her feet. The container for the reserved sacrament, suspended above the high altar in the cathedral was also at one time a pelican. The potency of the symbol grew, based on the story much supported and revered by St Augustine that the pelican pecks her own breast to feed her young on her blood. The female pelican is always pictured "vulning" or wounding her own breast as her young clamour around her feet - an image referred to as "the pelican in her piety". An even more developed version of this story is that of all birds the pelican loves its young the most, but as they grow they begin to strike their parents in the face and the parents in striking back kill their own young. After three days the mother feels great remorse and tearing open her own breast bathes the dead chicks in her blood and restores them to life - the interpretation being that we have struck God our Father in the face with our sin which has doomed us but in the blood of Christ will revive us.

So the symbol of the pelican is a feminine symbol of Christ - as the mother pelican sacrifices herself for her young so Christ shed his blood for us his children. There was even a medieval hymn - "Pie pelicane Jesu Domine" - O merciful pelican, Lord Jesus, and Eucharistic hymn attributed to St Thomas Aquinas "Adore te devote" which was movingly translated into English in the last century by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

O thou our reminder of Christ crucified,
Living Bread the life of us for whom he died,
Lend this life to me then: feed and feast my mind,
There be thou the sweetness man was meant to find.

Bring the tender tale true of the Pelican;
Bathe me, Jesu Lord, in what thy bosom ran –
Blood that but one drop of has the worth to win
All the world forgiveness of its world of sin. [ref]

This is essentially a poem about the self-sacrificing Christ hidden in the Eucharist.

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You can see how the symbol of the pelican caring for her young - such a caring symbol in fact that it has given its name to a safe place for kids to cross the road - a Pelican crossing.

You can see also how that feminine symbol has become increasingly dear to women in the church and perhaps most especially in the last 10 years to those of us called to priestly ordination in the church - a church which is fairly light on feminine symbols or female role models. In Northumbria we were glad to remember St Hilda of Whitby and other women saints like Hildegard, Teresa, Julian, and Catherine who have given women assurance that they too have worth and that they too are redeemed. All these are honoured and valued and revered but of all women in the christian story, blessed is she whose Festival we celebrate today. The Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary the mother of Jesus, Mary the Mother of God. Always she has been the ideal womanly role model and often she has been impossibly idealised beyond all reach of human kind. She - whose flesh it was made our Lord human and so accessible to us - has been gold-leafed and stained glass window-ised and sterilizingly sanctified into the rarefied stratosphere to be [placed] forever beyond our reach. Across the centuries doctrines have grown up around Mary whereby first she was seen to have been immaculately conceived herself so that she was therefore held to be utterly pure. Then in the 4th or 5th centuries beliefs also began to accrete about Mary's death - that when she had completed her earthly life she was in body and soul assumed into heavenly glory - and thus [she] is shown in paintings throughout medieval times called the "Dormition" or "Falling asleep of Mary".

All these doctrines gathering around the person of Mary succeeded in placing her in a celestial glass box of the thickest proportions far beyond our aspirations.

Yet today again we hear the powerful words of the Magnificat attributed to Mary – words deeply aware of the human condition – of pride and power and wealth and celebrating that our God is in charge, showing strength, scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry and having mercy on those who know and fear him, from one generation to the next. Today in reading those words, and the words from Galatians and which Paula read earlier we are returning to a time before the doctrines of the church began to gather around this strong girl from Nazareth in all her simplicity and as we look and look and look we see someone who is indeed strong; strong enough to be brave, strong enough to face the unknown; strong enough to be faithful and to hold on to the end.

We all need two parents. Some of us have been lucky to have two good parents - others may not have been so fortunate. But we continue to need two good parents even when our earthly parents fail or sadly die. We need our Lord to be our heavenly Father and we need the womanly image of Mary to be our spiritual mother. So we thank God today for our loving heavenly mother who through her own true humanity is able to be the bearer of Christ to us. She brought Christ into the world. She brought Christ to us. It is through her and the child she bore that we have our hope of salvation. It is also in and through Mary that we receive assurance that to be human, to be mortal, is a condition blessed, sanctified and approved of by God. Her flesh gave Christ his humanity so that he could truly understand and save us in our human state so perhaps it leaves us today thanking God for our ‘creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life…’ and praying that through our humanity, God may be able to bring others to Christian birth.

I'd like to close with an extract from a letter from a friend:

I have had some wonderful experiences recently when young people I knew in the past have renewed acquaintance. I taught a boy at Lancaster Royal Grammar School whom I also came across in my capacity as a Reader. I used to take services in his tiny village outside Lancaster (evocative name Nether Kellett!), and afterwards take tea with his family and drive his girl friend back to Lancaster: He became a priest and married the girl friend, but we had seen neither of them for nearly fifty years until they called on us recently. You can imagine the orgy of reminiscence.

When we were in Shepherdswell a rather stormy young lady was a colourful member of our youth club. She retained affectionate memories of us, and it was a joy to attend the baptism of her baby son last Sunday. In June 1 am conducting the wedding of another girl from Shepherdswell; a privilege I have had in other cases. One often wonders if anything sticks; it's good to have evidence that something, however little, does. '

One advantage of not going on holiday is that we shall be able to attend the ordination of the one person whom I can categorically say I converted. She was notorious as a practising unbeliever until she ran into some serious personal trouble with which I was able to help her. I can still remember the occasion on which her life turned round. She became an active Christian, and the present rector of the benefice put her forward for ordination as an OLM. I was able to help her through the angst which preceded and accompanied her decision to go ahead; she is now quite transformed, and will be an excellent priest. Praise be to God!