

Any ancient parish church is almost bound to have treasures; longevity would seem to almost guarantee that. In 1886 a great treasure was found in our church. One part seemingly hidden in the bell tower was joined to the other part and made whole and set in the south wall of our church. It is of course the alabaster carving of the Annunciation, one more attempt by Christians to depict the mystery of the Annunciation of our Lord to the Blessed Virgin Mary. All icons, paintings and statutes have depicted the same kind of scene: the archangel Gabriel, the messenger of God on one side, the Virgin Mary on the other. Many of the depictions have shown the archangel as a young man and the Virgin as a young woman but few, I think, have got to the nub of what is happening; a young girl of only 13 or 14 years of age is saying Yes to God. Now, just imagine that if you will. God Most High had sent his archangel messenger to ask, not to demand, not to cajole, not to threaten, but simply to ask: 'Will you, Miriam bat

Joachim, Mary daughter of Joachim, out of your love of me accept this vocation?’ We can never know how quickly came her answer; was it immediate, was it after a moment’s thought, did Mary weigh up the pro’s & con’s? None of this is recorded. But what is recorded is Mary’s answer: Yes. And from that moment of loving acceptance on Mary’s part God began to take flesh in her body. Now think of that: God who created the Cosmos and all life within it, who exists outside of His creation began to take flesh inside the body of a 13 or 14 year woman. If we truly reflect upon this fact it is mind-blowing! Mind-blowing or not it is where our salvation began to take shape and form. And it could only do that because a young girl could, out of the love she bore for God say Yes. And after the Son was born Mary was always there with her Son: raising him and teaching him his letters and how to read the Scriptures; taking him down to Jerusalem when he was 12 for his bar-mitzvah and then searching for him as the party left for

Nazareth; speaking of wine at a wedding at Cana in Galilee and instructing the servants of the marriage to do what he told them. Always constant, always there, always loving. Reclining with the Twelve and the other disciples in the Upper Room as her Son took bread and wine and blessed and broke and gave of himself: This is my Body; This is my Blood. Standing by the foot of the Cross seeing his life blood flow away for the redemption of the world and feeling the sword prophesied by Simeon pierce her own soul to the very quick. Waiting in the Upper Room with the Twelve as her Son appeared in his Resurrection. Always there, always constant, always loving. And we cannot doubt that in the Forty days between Easter Day and His Ascension the Son came to His Mother and she will have done what she did when He was a child; the mother will have held Him in her arms, always there, always constant, always loving. And all of this flowed from the moment of her Yes that she answered to the archangel and through him to God Most

High; yes I love you; yes I trust you; yes I give my life to you. Is it any wonder that Mary is hailed as the perfect example of how to be a Christian? Is it any wonder that Mary is hailed as the perfect example of how to respond when God calls.

At the foot of the cross she became the mother of John and he took her to his household and cared for her until her life on earth should end. And at the end of her life on earth that same John would have been witness that her body in death did not suffer the corruption of decay but, that as she had been united with her Son in life so too in death He took her, body and soul to be united with Him in heaven. And in heaven Mary remains always there, always constant, always loving for those who call upon her as Mother to show to us the Son that we may know the Father.

In her life on earth Mary accepted her vocation in love and remained constant to that vocation.

This is why for us who hear and stumble to respond to God Mary is the perfection of Christian living, the example for us to follow. And she is yet more than simply an exemplar of Christian living. By the closeness of her union with the Christ who took His human flesh from her she is the one whom Jesus out of His great love brought to the fullness of redemption in both soul and body in the solemnity that today we celebrate. And Christians throughout the ages have looked on this solemnity with joy and have dedicated their churches to The Blessed Virgin Mary of the Assumption, including the founders of our own Cathedral Church in Salisbury; have depicted this event in art as in the roundel in the roof of the entrance arch to the choir of York Minster; and have composed great music to sing the praises of God who takes what is ordinary and makes it extraordinary; who raises up the humble and the meek; who pulls down the proud and the vain; who feeds the

hungry with good things; who remembers us all in His mercy.

So it is that on this Holy Day we must take the example of Miriam bat Joachim, Mary daughter of Joachim to our hearts and souls, asking for her prayers, that when the Father sends to us we might also say, Yes, simply, lovingly, not counting the cost, not striving for any reward, save only that, like her, we might do His will, for His glory and for our salvation.

Amen