

Saints seem so inaccessible sometimes...so *holy*. I look at myself and my failures of my baptismal vows (see pages 304 and 305, in the Book of Common Prayer) and I shake my head. Still, this gives me a fragment of hope: when St. Paul talks to the Christians in the various places he visits in Asia Minor, he refers to them as “the saints,” and you know, if you read those letters, that they are struggling human beings like us.

So, what is a saint? I thought we might get closer to a definition that will work for us in our daily lives by looking at the lives of a few of the recognized saints, starting with St. Mary, who, because she gave birth to Jesus Christ, is known as the Mother of God, especially in the Orthodox churches.

When I think of her, I am reminded of a church in Hampshire in southern England, known as St. Mary’s—there are hundreds of St. Mary’s, (or St. Mary the Virgin) in England, but this stands out because it is an unusually large Saxon-era church with a central tower and a cross-shaped layout. Over the south transcript there is a rare, complete Anglo-Saxon inscription in the stone. It reads “Her swuthelath seyo Gecwayraednes The” (pronounced Hair swootalot say-o gekwadrednes tay) which, in case your Anglo-Saxon is rusty, means “Here the covenant becomes manifest to thee.”

The inscription has been dated to the reign of the Saxon king, Ethelred II, who reigned from 979 to 1016 of the current era. This church is precious not only because of its age and its picturesque setting and architectural style, but because it reminds us of a truth that we, as Anglican Christians, do well to remember: we are in a covenant—that is, an agreement to go together with God—that our parents commit to when we are baptized, or that we commit to when we are confirmed. We share that covenant with all the saints. We can say that a saint is someone in whom we see the covenant, made manifest.

In it, we agree to the basics of Christianity. In it, we say of Jesus Christ, “He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, and *born of the Virgin Mary.*”

There are complicated theologies connected with Mary’s pregnancy and motherhood. We’re not concerned with those today. The reason we honor Mary is because, *like her Son, she said YES to the Divine.*

This assent or affirmation is one that all saints make, and so it is particularly appropriate to think about it today. Mary’s life meant that the son of God came to be among us in human form, and also reflected and lived out the love of the Divine. We are called to do that same thing, in whatever manner is possible for us. We are human; yet there is a spark of the Divine in all of us.

According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me, according to your word.” Through her obedience, (as well as through her body) the Savior came into the world of matter and flesh, which theologians call “incarnation.”

Obedience is not a popular word these days: so unpopular indeed that some contemporary thinking might regard it as revolutionary. The word comes from the Latin “ob audire or, that which comes

from listening. Mary, and all the saints, listened to God. Mary listened to God before she spoke her great revolutionary hymn of praise in which the proud are scattered, thrones are vacated, and the rich are sent away empty while the hungry are fed.

Mary obeys God; that obedience makes her into a prophet challenging the established secular order. (As we look at the established secular order today, we can see a lot that needs to be challenged.) Her unique role as the mother of the Divine in the world, as the voice of God in prophecy, and as the mother of a human child who must have given her great joy as well as sorely trying her human patience: these make her unique among the saints and a model for all of them—and for us.

A beautiful icon of St. Symeon moved me deeply, because like some icons of Mary, it showed Symeon with a circle in the center of his torso, within which there was another icon, that of the Christ Child, right where his heart would be. It gave me great hope: we can *all* seek, though keeping our baptismal covenants, through listening to God and through LOVING the ones Jesus loved, to be God-bearers. Indeed, that is what we are, as members of what St. Paul called the Body of Christ. As today's hymn indicates, we can all seek to be saints.

Some Christians have a hard time with what is referred to as the “cult of Mary.” One person said, “You should not pray to Mary. Only God is worthy of prayer.” In fact, I don't pray TO Mary, or to any other saint. Because I believe that I can ask for the prayers of any other member of the Body of Christ, I ask her to pray FOR me, just as I might ask for your prayers for my intentions. I ask to walk with Mary, and Francis, and Symeon and Teresa and others on the great spiritual adventure known as prayer. I believe that saints keep their covenant (which means, to come with) with God, and that their faithful examples endeared them to God, and helps us to walk with God. Their help is dear to us, too.

The knowledge that Mary, in the moment of her greatest connection with the Divine, chose to recall God's action of mercy to the lowly, the hungry and the powerless, gives us a model for intentional merciful action in what is still God's world. The turning upside-down of what appeared to be the natural secular order was repeated when her son offered the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the affirmation that those who are blessed and happy are poor in spirit, in mourning, exhibit meekness, long for righteousness...none of those things that were taught as desirable in the secular world.

Mary's cousin, Elizabeth said, “Blessed is the one who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” May God allow us the blessing of taking her saintly example of obedience and love into a hungry world, praying in the name of her son, Jesus Christ.

AMEN.