

Mary's song of praise: 'My soul doth magnify the Lord and my Spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour' greets us as we enter this church, which is dedicated to her.

For anyone brought up within the tradition of evensong, these words are incredibly familiar, but like all familiar texts, we can take them for granted. The words flow effortlessly, particularly when sung, and therefore assume we understand them completely without really giving any thought to their meaning. The song as a whole is immensely subversive, turning upside down the whole social order, demonstrating God's preference for the poor, but for today, I want to concentrate on those first few words and what their significance is for us as a church. Because today is our Patronal festival, when we celebrate the dedication of this church, and we focus on its purpose here in the centre of Wimbledon Village.

Sometimes I come into the churchyard and it is so full of cars that it can feel as though we are a church hall with a church attached. At least once a year I will get a phone call from a couple asking how much it would cost to book the church for a wedding, with no thought that this is a church, to them it is just another possible venue alongside various hotels and country houses. From time to time I will get an email complaining about the state of one of the monuments outside in the churchyard, and I think, hold on, yes we are a historic building with all the responsibilities that go alongside that, but that is not our primary purpose. No, we are a church, and we are lucky enough to have a beautiful historic building and a hall that is popular and easy to let, and those things support our work as a church because they provide an income. But our purpose as a church is to magnify the Lord.

Magnify – it is an interesting word in this context. It has been translated as 'declare the greatness of' but I prefer magnify, because when we consider a magnifying glass, we can see why it is necessary that we magnify the Lord.

The obvious function of a magnifying glass is that it makes things look bigger. They can then be seen and understood more clearly, whether we are looking at very small print on a legal document or the intricate detail of a flower. If you take a little piece of leaf or skin or indeed any material, as you increase the magnification you will see more and more detail, and then you begin to realise its beauty and complexity. My very first job was in taking and analysing electron micrographs of leaves from ebony trees to see how they could be used as an aid to classification. The pictures of the undersides of the leaves were amazingly beautiful, some resembling fields of poppies, others lunar landscapes. Until I saw them, I had no idea that there was this degree of variation.

You might say, of course we need to magnify small things, but why would we need to magnify God? Surely he's big enough already!

Many people do not know God, and yet they have an image of the God they don't believe in, and this image is small and simple. They have formed this picture of God partly as a result of children's stories and partly on what they have read in the papers about Christians. They have decided that Christians believe in a God as a kind of old man in heaven, who decided one day out of the blue to create the world, who arbitrarily decides who will die of starvation, who will get cancer, and then just sits there and watches, but who will do anything, even find a parking place, for paid up Christians. It is an appalling image. It is an unbiblical image. Yet it is the image projected by some Christians and reinforced by sections of the media. So, it is up to us to show the greatness of God, the complexity. To shout 'no, that is not what God is like'.

Yet we too may fall into the trap of making God too small, of wanting to tame Him, make him answerable to us. God is not answerable to anyone, he is freedom itself. All the great spiritual writers speak of the absence of God, of our yearning for him, of those times when we would cry out 'my God, my God why have you forsaken me?' and yet no answer comes. And it is not up to us to fabricate an answer.

For our creator made not just our world but the whole universe and perhaps many other universes. We see echoes of his work in the many patterns all around us. We cannot tell whether he set it all in motion and allowed it total freedom to evolve as it would, or whether there was a bias towards a particular line of development. We know how natural selection works, we understand the genetics, but the 'why' remains for the time being a mystery. But some things we do know - the important things. We know that God cares for his creation, for each person. He cares how we treat each other. He allows us freedom to turn away from him, freedom to do wrong, but always longs for us to turn back to him. When someone suffers, he suffers with them. How do we know this? - Through the gospels, through Christ. God has shown us through Christ what this world might be like if we showed love to all people, if we were prepared to share and not grab what we can for ourselves. He has shown us that love is the key and that love is not necessarily spontaneous, but that it requires work. It is an act of will, it requires discipline and self sacrifice.

This is the image of God that we need to share. We need to be the glass through which people look to see God. God is so much bigger than we can ever imagine, and yet in our small way we can help to magnify the Lord, to help others to see him more clearly - through study of the bible, through

prayer, through acts of kindness, through putting others before ourselves. For when they see, they will believe.

Our souls, our whole being, should magnify the Lord, and our spirit exult in God our Saviour. Amen.