

On September 8th the Church celebrates the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is one of the few figures in the church's calendar whose birthday is honoured in the calendar. The only others are in fact our Lord himself and St John the Baptist.

We usually commemorate saints on the anniversaries of their deaths. This draws our attention to the way God's grace triumphed in their lives. Their holiness is evidence of how they cooperated with the gifts and guidance of the Holy Spirit - and they therefore challenge to us to cooperate in the same way and encourage us to believe that it really is possible for us all to be saints.

That's a pretty wonderful thing. But when we celebrate the birthdays of Jesus, Mary and John the Baptist we are taken to an even more wonderful and profound aspect of God's mercy.

One of my favourite passages in the whole of the Bible is the first chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians which describes what the writer calls, "the mystery of God's will, his plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth." It's a powerful and infinitely reassuring picture of how God is in control of everything, how nothing is wasted, and nothing is pointless.

The same passage also tells us that this is not a general truth, but applies directly to each and every one of us. "God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." Even more than that, "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love."

To my mind the real importance of celebrating Mary's birthday is that it focuses our attention on this long term plan of God's, and on how God prepared her for her part in it as the mother-to-be of the one in whom God would gather all things up. When we think about Mary, we are naturally grateful for the way in which she collaborated with God's plan and brought Jesus to birth. But here today we recall God's providential grace to her long before there could be any question of her saying "Yes" to the angel of the annunciation.

For each one of us too, God has a plan within his big plan, and has been preparing us for it from even before we were born.