

Solemnity of the 150th anniversary of the Dedication of Belmont Abbey Church

4th September 2010.

Homily

Today, as we celebrate the consecration of this Benedictine Abbey church, we also prepare for the Visit of Pope Benedict to the United Kingdom. Benedict – a name which echoes through the story of our faith, a name resonant with the call to praise God and the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel.

Benedict XVI is an eloquent preacher of the Gospel, attending carefully to the audience he addresses, as every preacher must. One of the themes central to his work is the need for people today not to forget their deepest identity, their roots, their heritage. I have little doubt that this will be part of his message to the United Kingdom.

Simply put, the message is this: Without roots there is no growth. Pope Benedict has often spoken of the need for Europe in particular to remember its Christian roots, to cherish its Christian heritage, to see within that heritage not a problem to be solved but a gift to be discovered afresh. He has said that while the West is making a praiseworthy attempt to be completely open to other values, perhaps it no longer loves itself. He suggests that we are tempted to see in our own history only what is blameworthy and destructive and that we may be no longer capable of perceiving in it what is great and pure.

Yet among the many influences which shape our lives, both personally and collectively, the saving message of the Gospel stands out as a source of hope, of compassion, of heroic generosity, of artistic inspiration of every kind. The Gospel has shaped our land just as it reveals the true shape of who we are and what we are to become. Christ is our Way, our Truth and our Life. While being humble and realistic, there is no need for us to be defensive about our Christian heritage, or apologise for our Catholic faith.

Churches are built to remind us who we truly are. They stand across our landscape as pointers to the truth that life is best lived in the conscious presence of a loving God. They help us, in the business of our lives, to retain our focus on God and to learn that God never takes his loving focus away from us. We gather in church, frequently or not, to be reminded and strengthened in our most profound identity. As St Paul tells us: ‘You belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God’ (1 Cor 3.23). This is the saving truth of who we really are and where our well-being is to be found.

The readings of the Mass this morning help us to deepen this simple reflection. The gathering of the people depicted in the First Book of the Kings reveals the heart of this identity and well-being: here God lives with his people. Here God listens, God hears. The two words – listen, hear - are repeated six times, as a confident appeal and assertion. The same confidence is in our own hearts: ‘Hear the entreaty of your servant and of Israel your people as they pray in this place. From heaven where your dwelling is, hear; and, as you hear, forgive.’ (v.30)

But we come to church not simply to pray, and to be heard, but also to be built into something new. Here we are ‘being built into a house where God lives, in the Spirit’ (Eph 2.22). We are never visitors in a church. We are not even its owners. But we are part of what it is, what it stands for: its bricks and mortar in our flesh, its beauty and form in our virtue, its praise and liturgy in our lives.

If this is true of every church in our landscape, it is intensely true of this monastic church, whose consecration we celebrate, exactly 150 years from the day. This beautiful church, and the entire monastic building of which it is the heart and soul, stand in the landscape of our history as a monument to faith, to perseverance, to prayer, and to the richness of the monastic tradition as a clear witness to faith in this land.

In celebrating this anniversary, much of which is handsomely narrated in the introduction to our Mass booklet, we celebrate the remarkable contribution to the life of the Church made by the English Benedictine Congregation. This is a story of the tenacity of a rich and validated pattern of discipleship, a true charism in the life of the Church and one which has proved its enduring worth here in this country.

But this is not a simple story. There are many aspects and nuances in the account of the English Benedictine tradition and mission. So I tread here as one less wise and therefore a little warily. But I am deeply encouraged by the fact that the preacher at the great celebration of Mass the day after the Consecration of this church was none other than Bishop Ullathorne, one of the great English Benedictine monk-bishops to serve in this land. He can be my guide, as for a while, as Archbishop of Birmingham, I had the privilege of standing in his shoes.

As you will well know, by the time he came here to preach on 5 September 1860 Ullathorne had already taken radical steps to build up a sense of mission within the re-emerging Benedictine communities. In September 1845 he had gone onto the streets of Coventry wearing the black Benedictine habit, provoking opposition and outrage, yet asserting that the great presence of the black monks was again part of public life in this land. In establishing St Osburg’s he asserted a role for a city-centre monastery, an extension community which would attract people through the vivid nature of its witness, which would offer them prayer and liturgy of the highest order and which would attract vocations for the mother house. By that time he had also explored the role of the ‘missionary monk’, living alone, out of community, on the mission. But of this he was wary, believing it always to be a temporary measure.

Great initiatives also took place here, with the consecration of the Church marked by the presence of Abbot Gueranger of Solesmes, the first mitred Abbot to be seen in this land since the Reformation.

By 1860, Belmont was already the common Novitiate and House of Studies for the English Benedictine Congregation. It was pioneering not only in the thoroughness of its studies especially in Scripture and history, not only in its architecture, not only in its revival of plainchant, but also in the pathway of spirituality which it re-established from earlier riches, drawing in particular on the writings of Augustine Baker.

Yet this was not without controversy, as Baker believed that the mission was not an essential feature of the life of an English Benedictine monk, concentrating rather on the pattern of contemplative prayer as essential for the monk and the community.

Yet Belmont wanted to play its own role in the development of the mission of the Church. It did so less in the line of Bishop Ullathorne and more under the direction of Bishops Brown and Hedley with a close intertwining of the life of the Abbey and the life of the emerging diocese. Indeed, Belmont was unique in reviving the ancient tradition of the monastic chapter being the cathedral chapter itself, for Newport and Menevia.

Not surprisingly then, as Abbot Geoffrey (Scott) has written, Belmont sought not only to revive Augustine Baker's lessons on the contemplative life but also to combine them with Francis de Sales's pastoral guidance for busy parish priests. Bishop Hedley was the main inspiration behind this attempt to combine English Benedictine monastic and missionary spirituality.

Whatever patterns are followed in working out this combination of monastery and mission – and there are many – I find myself coming back to earlier words of Bishop Ullathorne in trying to establish the heart of the matter. When addressing the General Chapter in July 1850, Bernard Ullathorne said:

‘I know well that the expansion of the Congregation would serve the best interests of the Church in England in very important ways. It is a deep conviction in my mind...that the spirit of St Benedict is as well-fitted for the exigencies of the Church in modern days as it was for those of the Middle Ages, for it is a spirit at once generous, practical and accommodating to circumstances.’

He illustrated this same conviction in an obituary for Dom Bernard Barber, President General of the EBC. (Downside Review vol VIII p.74 cf Judith Champ, p153) There he spoke of Dom Bernard's gift of combining high principles with gentleness and consideration of practice as the secret of the exercise of Christian authority and leadership. This is a spirit and practice we need today as much as ever. This is an enrichment that Benedictine life can surely continue to provide.

Today as we rejoice in the richness of that spirit, we thank God for the blessings of this monastic church. Here many have been formed in the way of high principle and gentleness of practice, rooted in a search in prayer for the God who calls us to great holiness yet never deserts us in our poverty and failure. We thank God for the missionary spirit of the English Benedictine Congregation and the many ways in which that spirit is expressed. We pray that this well-spring of rich life in the Church may be sustained and renewed so that its contribution to this land may again be in full-flow, deeply rooted in prayer and community, and reaching out in compassion and love.

We pray, too, for the success of the Visit of Pope Benedict to this land. We think particularly of the moment when, together with the Archbishop of Canterbury, he will pray at the tomb of St Edward the Confessor. At that moment we may think again of the great tradition of Benedictine life, recalling not only the name of Dom Sigebert Buckley, the last surviving monk of 17th century Westminster, but also the missionary

days of recusancy and the 19th century revival embodied in this church. We ask the Lord that even the example of our poor faith, together with the eloquent words of the Holy Father, may help many to find again the richness and joy of the faith. In faith we echo the words of Peter, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' and we hear in our hearts, 'You are a happy man! Because it was not flesh and blood that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church and the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it.' (Mt16.15)
Amen.

+Vincent Nichols
3-9-10.