

## LOURDES MASS

19<sup>th</sup> February 2011.

Westminster Cathedral

In a personal letter, written in 1861, St Bernadette described what happened at the first moment Our Blessed Lady appeared to her. It is rather remarkable.

St Bernadette wrote this: 'When I saw her I rubbed my eyes. I thought I must be mistaken. I put my hand in my pocket, where I kept my rosary. I wanted to make the sign of the cross, but I could not lift my hand to my forehead; it fell back. Then the Lady crossed herself. I tried again, and although my hand was trembling, I was eventually able to make the sign of the cross. I began to say my rosary.'

These words suggest the three points I wish to highlight this afternoon.

First: on seeing Mary Bernadette experienced helplessness, an inability to do for herself familiar and normal things.

Secondly: she moved from that experience of vulnerability into a deeper awareness and appreciation of herself.

And thirdly, when she started to pray the Rosary she said the 'Our Father'. Now, the theme for our pilgrimage in Lourdes this summer is 'Praying the Our Father with Bernadette'.

Bernadette said: 'I wanted to make the sign of the cross, but I could not lift my hand to my forehead; it fell back.'

In these few words is reflected the experience of vulnerability and dependence which marks every human life. The fact that we are not God means that, sooner or later, every single one of us has to come to terms with what we cannot do. For many this experience comes most unmistakably and inescapably with illness and old age. In those circumstances we know that we are helpless, in need of the care of others.

This means that caring for the sick and the elderly is of particular importance. I thank God for the yearly experience of our pilgrimage to Lourdes which brings out of each of us that willingness to care for, to love, each other, giving special attention to our sick and vulnerable.

Pope Benedict, in his Visit to the UK reminded us of the importance of this care. He said: 'As advances in medicine and other factors lead to increased longevity, it is important to recognise the presence of growing numbers of older people as a blessing for society. Every generation can learn from the experience and wisdom of the generation that preceded it. Indeed the provision of care for the elderly should be considered not so much an act of generosity as the repayment of a debt of gratitude.' (St Peter's, Vauxhall, Saturday 17 September 2010)

This insistence, which we really should take to heart, stands in contrast to some apparent prevailing attitudes in our society. Many have been very disturbed by the recent report of the shocking neglect of the elderly in some of our hospitals, while in others, of course, they receive excellent care. Many too are deeply anxious that forthcoming cuts in public expenditure seem to fall, too easily and too quickly, on services due to the vulnerable and the elderly. Our own Bishops' Conference, just a few months ago, made this plea:

‘We appreciate that extremely difficult decisions are being taken by central and local government, but we urge those responsible not to lose sight of the moral imperative of caring for those most in need, while acting fairly and impartially.’ We added: ‘The future of society crucially depends on the nature and quality of family life.’ (19th November 2010).

It seems to me that, even in economic terms, the supports offered to families who work hard to care for their beloved parents in times of great need, are the last things which should be cut. Indeed it makes more sense to help families to care for their elderly wherever possible.

The second point of our reflection is this:

When Bernadette regains her movement, the first thing she did was to make the sign of the Cross. She touched her head, her heart, her shoulders in the clear and familiar sign that every aspect of our lives are touched by God and best guided by God. Human endeavour, whether of the mind, the heart, or the strength of each one of us, finds its best guidance in a living relationship with the Lord.

To state this is simply to affirm that we humans are essentially spiritual beings. God has placed within our hearts a desire for happiness that finds its fulfilment, ultimately, in Him. He has given us an enquiring mind, a searching intellect, so that we long to know the truth, the meaning of our existence and our experience. Faith brings the additional gift of knowing God to be the Truth itself. Then, too, we human beings are blessed with strength of muscle and of will, which, when guided by God's wisdom, seek not to build a façade of independence from each other but a spirit and society of service for each other.

When, in our society, we forget that we are spiritual beings and live, day by day, as if God does not exist, we build on shaky foundations. When we actively deny that spiritual dimension we can be sure that our achievements will not last, because we have disregarded basic needs, and basic rights, on which the nurture human goodness depends.

While this is true of our society as a whole, it is also true of our care for the sick. The spiritual care of the sick is vitally important, not only to those who are patients but also to those who care for them and tend to their needs. Indeed, as Pope Benedict reminded us: ‘As the normal span of our lives increases, our physical capacities are often diminished; and yet these times may well be among the most spiritually fruitful years of our lives’. Simply put, the sick and the elderly have a great deal to teach us.

The dignity of every patient is rooted, in the end, in the meaning of the sign of the Cross: that every person's mind, heart and strength is and always have been blessed by God. I thank God for the witness given by so many, in Lourdes and elsewhere, to this truth: that every person is loved by God, from conception to natural birth, and is worthy of our respectful care and love.

The third and last point is this: Bernadette's prayer started with the 'Our Father'. This prayer, which we know so well, is today filling our Cathedral in these beautiful banners. We do well to meditate on each of its phrases, one by one, day by day. But at this moment let me consider just one phrase, and briefly too.

In the Our Father we pray 'Thy will be done'. And it is a struggle to mean it.

These four words take us to the heart of our discipleship. There, in the desire to do the will of God, Mary is our leader, just as she led Bernadette in her saying of these words. For Mary herself said them to the Angel Gabriel: 'Let it be done to me according to thy word.'

Each day this is to be our prayer, in health and in sickness, in joy and in sorrow. As long as we are striving to live as the Lord teaches us, then no matter what circumstances may bring, no matter what illness or incapacity may be thrust upon us, we are invited to say these words: 'Thy will be done.'

We say them not because we are passive and spineless, but because we know our loving Father. We know that he sees more than we do. We know that he has our ultimate good at heart and wants to use us for his own loving purposes. Only in this spirit can we let go and trust ourselves, our discomfort and our pain to him.

Listen again to the words of Pope Benedict, speaking so recently in our own country: 'One may enjoy good health in old age; but equally Christians should not be afraid to share in the suffering of Christ, if God wills that we struggle with infirmity. My predecessor, the late Pope John Paul, suffered very publicly during the last years of his life. It was clear to all of us that he did so in union with the sufferings of our Saviour. His cheerfulness and forbearance as he faced his final days were a remarkable and moving example to all of us.'

In offering these three points of reflection, I also want to express my thanks to you all for the witness you give, in your illness, in your discomfort, in your caring and in your professional lives, to the true and eternal value of every human person. This witness, wherever it is offered, with or without words, helps us to respond, as we must, to the invitation of the Gospel. Pope Benedict expressed that invitation so eloquently when he called us to be witnesses to the beauty of holiness, to the splendour of the truth and to the joy and freedom born of friendship with Christ. May our Mass today reawaken that friendship in us all. Amen