

950th Anniversary of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham

Mass in Westminster Cathedral

Saturday 26 March 2011

The Shrine of Walsingham is part of the ancient and rich tapestry of this island. It is part of its landscape, shaped by the pilgrim routes of many centuries. It is part of the history of the movement of people and their social structure. And it is a powerful part of the landscape of faith. So today, as we celebrate the 950th Anniversary of the Shrine, we give thanks to God for all who have played a part in the life of Walsingham, for all who have had recourse to Mary in that holy place, for all the graces and blessings received through the intercession of Our Lady of Walsingham.

Walsingham is a great reminder of the links of faith which bind us into a far wider unity. The Shrine reminds us of our European heritage, and, more importantly, of our links with the land of Our Blessed Lord himself. Nazareth is linked to Norfolk just as we are all part of the family of Mary.

Today, as we celebrate this great Shrine I also express my thanks to Fr Michael Rear for his splendid book, 'Walsingham: Pilgrims and Pilgrimages', published to mark this anniversary, and on sale in the bookshop next door after Mass –with Fr. Michael will be willing to sign copies. But this is a homily, not a commercial!

As we read in this book, pilgrimage, of course, has always had about it an element of protest. In the Middle Ages, when life was short and brutish for the majority who had little control over their comings and goings, a pilgrimage set them free if only for a season. It gave a strong sense that life is an intentional journey. We are going to places, and ultimately to the heavenly Jerusalem. The constant stream of royal pilgrims was something of a leveller. They were privileged, yet also in need of Our Lady's prayers and God's blessing. One Holy House found room for all. (Preface, p11)

In his book, Fr Michael reminds us that, most poignantly, the finest record we have of the image of Our Lady of Walsingham comes from the seal of the Priory appended to its Deed of surrender in the reign of Henry VIII.

The Priory and the Shrine were subsequently destroyed.

But this image of Our Lady has endured. And it is wonderful to have this statue here in the Cathedral today. We proudly carry it in procession and joyfully honour Mary, in her title of Our Lady of Walsingham.

From this image we learn so much. Here is Mary, Seat of Wisdom. Here is Mary of the Ark of the New Covenant, bearing within her all the glory of God and bringing that divine life into reality in our human flesh. Here is Mary circled with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, dwelling now in this living Temple. Here is Mary presenting her Son to us, that we may always attend to him, as she most certainly did. Here is Mary, with her Son, triumphant over evil in the battle that tests us all.

Today, in a special way, we focus on that seminal moment of the Annunciation. Here, as we know, is the most important word of consent ever uttered in human history. As Mary says the words ‘Let it be done to me according to your word’ the entire course of our history enters a new phase. A huge window swings open, letting in the grace-filled light of revelation, filling our world with the breeze of the Holy Spirit and the fresh dew of his descent. Now everything is different if only we, like Mary, have ears to hear and eyes with which to see.

Obedience is the hall-mark of the Annunciation: Mary’s readiness to let the willingness of her heart flow upwards and outwards as an unequivocal ‘Yes’, whereas we so often hold back the loving willingness

in our hearts in fear and anxiety about the risk we are taking. Today let us find again the courage and the grace to be more ready, less guarded, less calculating in our expression of our faith in word and deed.

Reflecting recently on the lessons we learn from Mary, Pope Benedict said these words:

‘Mary tells us that we are all called to open ourselves to the action of the Holy Spirit in order, in our ultimate destiny, to attain an immaculate state, fully and definitively free from evil. She tells us this with her own holiness, with her gaze full of hope and compassion which evokes words such as these: “Do not fear my child, God loves you; he loves you personally; he thought of you before you came into the world and called you into being to fill you with

love and with life; and for this reason he came to meet you, he made himself like you, he became Jesus, God-man, like you in all things but sin; he gave himself for your sake to the point of dying on the Cross, and thus he gave you a new life, free, holy and immaculate”.’

Under the guidance of Pope Benedict, and as we gather around this statue today, let us understand afresh that Mary’s gaze is God’s gaze upon each one of us. She looks at us with the Father’s love itself and blesses us. She acts as our ‘advocate’, *Advocata nostra*. For even if everyone were to speak badly of us, she, our Mother, would speak well of us because her immaculate heart is in tune with God’s mercy.

We reflect on her gaze on us, on our country, as we rejoice in the title of the Dowry of Mary. She sees this country not as an anonymous agglomeration of so many different people, struggling to hold together, but as a constellation in which God knows each one personally by name, one by one, and calls us to shine with his light. And those who in the world's eyes are the first, to God are the lowliest; those who are little to God are great.

As we reflect on the great history of this Shrine, there are two important imperatives that come into my mind. They are interconnected. One is the imperative to work and pray for the visible unity of all Christians; the second is to proclaim the Gospel in our land to people who are increasingly distanced from it.

The story of Walsingham tells with tragic clarity the lack of unity between the followers of Christ here. But it also tells the grace-filled tale of our gradual and growing mutual rediscovery, cooperation and commitment to one another. Walsingham is a centre for ecumenism and this celebration must reinvigorate within the heart of each one of us our work for our greater unity and our appeal to Mary to be its instrument, in accordance to the will of her Son.

The second task is also vividly illustrated in the history of Walsingham. Before it was ever a Christian shrine, Walsingham was a shrine to the pagan god Mercury. Now Mercury was the messenger of the gods. He was known as the guide of souls, the giver of good fortune, the patron of merchants and traders.

Guilds and merchants met on his feast day. People flocked to this shrine, offering prayers and votives, following that hidden longing of their hearts for the touch of the divine and the gift of blessing, according to their best lights. The instinct for religion runs deep within every human being. There is a natural spiritual capacity within our nature and we are restless until it finds an expression and fulfilment. That was so in Roman times. It is still true today.

The great gift of our faith is that it opens for us the truth of that instinct and the fulfilment of that capacity. Just as Walsingham has gone from Mercury to Mary, so too, today, we are invited to walk the same road with our contemporaries, helping them to recognise what lies in their hearts and to find it fulfilled in the eternal Word of God, come in our flesh, presented to

us by Mary. That is our mission and our joy.

May Mary bless us this day. May Our Lady of Walsingham continue to have her special place in our hearts, in our culture and in the refreshing of our faith.

Amen.

✠ Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster