

Homily for Saturday 24th September 2022 – Year C – Formation Day for Diaconate

Constancy in Service

Today, we celebrate Our Lady of Walsingham.

If, on a clear night, away from the city lights, you look up into the sky, you will see the band of faint stars which we know as the Milky Way; which in the Middle Ages became known as the Walsingham Way, such was the devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham, and the number of pilgrims that visited the shrine there – as many as the stars in the Milky Way.

Around the year 1061, a lady by the name of Richeldis, had visions in which she was transported to the House of the Annunciation in Nazareth, where the Virgin Mary had received the message from the angel a millennium before. In her visions, Richeldis was instructed by Mary to build, in the Norfolk village of Walsingham where Richeldis lived, an exact replica of the Nazareth House. Soon, Walsingham became known as ‘England’s Nazareth’, and a place of great pilgrimage for those praying for the intercession of Our Lady; and ‘Nazareth House’ became a place where ‘all who sought her there, might find succour’.

Sadly, the original Nazareth House and the priory church built over it, were destroyed in the Reformation. Very little remains of the great priory; but the chapel, known as the ‘Slipper Chapel’, where pilgrims would leave their shoes before walking barefoot for the final mile of their pilgrimage, remained; and in recent times has been restored and become the heart of the National Marian Shrine for Catholics. Also, nearby is the Anglican Shrine and church, within which is a replica of the House of Nazareth.

Walsingham, and today's celebration, capture for us the constancy of love and care Mary had for her Son, Jesus; and has for us, her adopted children.

As today's Collect, the 'gathering prayer' at the start of our Mass, tells us: the 'ever-Virgin Mary conceived God's Son in her heart before she conceived in him in her womb'. And throughout her life she was always close to her son, Jesus: at the wedding feast at Cana; in his journeys across Galilee and to Jerusalem; and of course, even at the foot of the Cross.

Such constancy of care and love is something which Jesus also showed to his followers, such that, when Jesus tells his disciples, as we hear in the Gospel, that 'The Son of Man is going to be handed over to the power of men', they did not understand; or perhaps they did not want to understand. They did not want change. In recent days, we have seen how, for many people in this country, indeed around the world, the death of Queen Elizabeth II has been a shocking change. For seventy years and more she has been a constant in our lives; and many have recalled her constancy in love and service to her family, our country and the Commonwealth. And recognised too, has been the constancy in her love and service to her Sovereign, Jesus Christ, King of the Universe, King of Creation, whom Queen Elizabeth II often referred to, especially in her Christmas speeches.

Such momentous change that we have experienced in these past couple of weeks, can only add to the anxiety that many will feel in these times of great uncertainty: of increasing cost-of-living, of war in Ukraine, of devastating floods in Pakistan brought about by climate change.

For us, who may also share those anxieties, let us call on the intercession of Our Lady of Walsingham, that we may be filled with courage. For it is we, who through our baptism are called to love and be of service to others; it is we who are called to be ministers of the diakonia of charity; who in this time of change and uncertainty, are to bring to those we encounter, the constancy and unchanging love of Mary's son, Jesus Christ, and the everlasting mercy of God the Father.

Pope Francis speaks of the deep joy that knowing Christ brings, even when the pressure of day-to-day living brings us unhappiness. It is that deep joy that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we are share with others.

For us also, gathered here today, who as today's Collect tells us, we who are a pilgrim people, let us join the pilgrims through the centuries; and rejoicing in the constant care of our Holy Mother, Mary, Our Lady of Walsingham; may we welcome her Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, into our hearts and become a holy house – a Nazareth House, fit for his eternal dwelling.