

## HOMILY GLASTONBURY PILGRIMAGE July 2017

*Now there was a man named Joseph...a good and upright man... from Arimathaea...and he was longing for God's kingdom.*

It is a great joy for me to be here with you today as we make pilgrimage to this ancient and holy place, a pilgrimage which I know has loyal and lively support and one which I make for the very first time.

It's also a privilege to be here with you, not only in a personal capacity, but as Priest Administrator of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham. Mass was offered yesterday and prayers will be offered today at the Shrine for this celebration, and I hope that in this way a good link between these two ancient pilgrimage centres, Walsingham and Glastonbury, will be forged and, under God and the prayers of Our Lady, bear fruit. There may be considerable distance between them in terms of miles, but there is much that they have in common, and I believe much that they have to offer in their witness to the wider Church and indeed to the world.

The Church and the world need places of pilgrimage, places which help us to focus on the eternal truths of God, that present to us the beauty as well as the challenges of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and remind us of the prayers and encouragement of the saints, who have not only gone before us, but who continue to pray for us and guide us on our pilgrim way, not least of course Our Blessed Lady. Honoured and feted both here and in Walsingham, Mary points unceasingly to the glory and love of God revealed in Jesus.

Bishop Geoffrey Rowell, whose funeral took place only a few days ago, once quoted in a sermon a phrase from a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins. "Mary", wrote Hopkins, "has but one work to do, to let God's glory through". "This" said Bishop Geoffrey, "was Mary's life, this is your life, this is our life – this life of transforming grace which changes us from glory into glory".

Those words touch on a spiritual link which exists between Glastonbury and Walsingham and the purpose of pilgrimage. And at Walsingham there is also a physical and material link with Glastonbury. As many of you will know, the outer walls of the Holy House are studded with stones retrieved, one way or another, by Fr Hope Patten, from the great medieval

monasteries of England. There you see stones which once formed part of the buildings of monasteries close to Walsingham such as Bingham, the great Benedictine houses such as Chester, Evesham and Bridlington, and the Augustinian houses of Christchurch, Milton and Dunstable.

Included in this collection of stones is one from the very place in which we are gathered today: Glastonbury. It's under the Holy Water stoup as you enter the Holy House from the main entrance to the Church, so you know where to find it next time you're at the Shrine.

There is something important about those stones.

They are physical, material and tangible reminders of the great powerhouses of prayer which were once so much part of the fabric of our land. Today we are surrounded by the ruins of a once great Benedictine Abbey – many, many stones – but that one stone which is now all those miles away in Walsingham is that it now part of a building which itself witnesses to the truth that in Christ, God was made visible, that he took on our human nature and that the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

During the wonderful ecumenical pilgrimage to Lourdes organised by the Shrine and the Society of Mary nearly 10 years ago, Archbishop Rowan Williams said that *when God's people relate to Jesus Christ, they do not relate to an idea or an ideal. They don't even relate to a distant memory: they relate to a bodily person in material history: and unless there is that relationship with the material, historical actuality of Jesus, our faith is thin and empty, it becomes a faith which is essentially just about our ideas, and the one thing the Gospel is not is a reaffirmation of the brightest and the best ideas that human beings have had!*

S. Luke in his gospel is very keen to emphasise that his account is not something made up. Historical facts are very important to Luke, and the detail of his Gospel is based on the evidence of eyewitnesses, of those who saw Jesus in the flesh, and saw what happened.

The account of the Lord's Death and Burial is no exception. In his Gospel Luke presents his witnesses one by one. The centurion saw what happened and made his comment: *surely this man had done nothing wrong*. The crowds standing by saw what happened and returned to their

homes saddened and shocked. Jesus' followers, not least the women, stood at some distance, but they too saw what happened. And another of those witnesses was Joseph of Arimathea.

The association of Joseph of Arimathea with Glastonbury is of course well known. The legends abound. But the power of them lies in that Joseph was someone saw with his own eyes, and touched with his own hands, and laid in his own tomb, the body of Jesus Christ himself.

Joseph was, Luke tells us, a good and upright man, who longed for God's kingdom. On that day, he received the reward of his goodness and was granted the privilege of taking down the body of Jesus from the Cross and ministering to the One who is the source of all goodness; on that day, although he didn't fully realise it, he saw the beginning of the breaking in of the kingdom of Christ and his victory over sin and death, a reign a kingdom, the angel had said at the Annunciation, which would never end.

The theme of this pilgrimage is *St Joseph of Arimathea: Looking for the Kingdom in serving Christ Crucified*.

Our faith is not a matter of ideas or ideals. It's not centred on a theory, a concept or a particular "ology". It is centred on a person, on Jesus Christ, who, as we proclaim in the Creed, came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.

In Jesus, Joseph's search and longing for the kingdom of God was fulfilled. Jesus, the Word made flesh, was not just a sign of God's kingdom, but the kingdom itself, present in the flesh.. In seeing Jesus and in serving Jesus, he saw and served the kingdom he longed for. He saw and he served it in Christ, who was born of Mary, crucified in the flesh, buried in the tomb – in Joseph's very own tomb - and who was raised again on the third day.

It is the same Jesus Christ whom we come to worship and adore today here in this ancient and holy place, and it is his kingdom we look for and long for and seek to serve.

His kingdom is present wherever he is present. And although we have not, like Joseph, been granted the privilege of seeing him with our own eyes, we know that Jesus is present here amongst us who are gathered as his Church. He himself has spoken to us as we have listened to the Scriptures.

And he will be truly present when by the transforming power and grace of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine offered on this altar become his Body and his Blood.

Having recognised his presence here, as at every Mass, our task is always to go out and to look for it in other places too, not least in those who are in need, in the sick, the sorrowful, the lonely and the lost, in all who long for the coming of the kingdom. In them we will see Christ, and him crucified, and in serving them help them to see him and the kingdom too.

In this way, our faith goes beyond being simply a matter of words, of ideas or ideals, however good or noble or spiritual they may be. It becomes instead something alive and active within the joys and sorrows of human life and experience, rooted in Jesus Christ, who, as Walsingham and Glastonbury will always remind us is Immanuel, God with us, God's Kingdom with us, the Word made flesh who dwells among us.

At the conclusion of every pilgrimage to Walsingham, as during the Last Visit pilgrims face the Holy House, they ask for Mary's prayers: *Pray that I may have a safe and happy return home, and that God may give me the grace to do at home what you have taught me to do here.*

May that be our prayer today, as we experience here the presence of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ and having been taught by Mary, and by Joseph, that good and upright man from Arimathaea, who longed for God's kingdom, may we be given the grace to serve Christ who was born of Mary, and who was crucified, but who rose again on the third day, and who now lives and reigns for ever.