

Glastonbury Abbey Pilgrimage Eucharist 15 June 2013

It is a joy for me to be here today. Although to be honest it is a joy tinged with some sorrow. This place and this pilgrimage was, 50 years ago, a very important part of my own journey of faith. Having grown up in a non-church going home, I was at the age of 17 brought to Christ through the ministry of a wonderful parish priest in the Catholic tradition in Southampton. With preparation for Confirmation came instruction in serving at the altar and participation in the annual parish pilgrimage to Glastonbury. So it remained throughout my sixth form and university days. Attendances back in the 60s were huge and those who gathered here, from across the south and west of England, were a pretty mixed bunch indeed, and so it should be. For that is the point of pilgrimages. They are all about encounter, encounter with God, and encounter with those whom God has called to be on the journey of encounter with us.

Down through the centuries people have made pilgrimages for three reasons. Firstly, because there are such things as very

special places; place of tangible prayer and service, where the veil between time and eternity, between the physical and the spiritual, between this world and the Other, between humanity and God, is just that - very thin - almost transparent. It's a place where you just **are** very close to God. Many of the great places of pilgrimages are just like that, and people stop and catch their breath and say *"In this place people have prayed - you can feel it in the stones - truly God is in this place"* So pilgrimages are journeys to "thin places" - places of encounter with God. Such a place as Glastonbury has been for me.

But it's not just the goal of the pilgrimage that is important, but the process: what actually happens on the way to these places, matters as well. The first thing that seems to happen is learning: learning to travel on with a wide variety of different people from different places, with different experiences and different stories, but really united in a common goal will, if you allow it, always be an education and a transformation in itself. It becomes a way of opening windows of fresh understanding on to others, on to oneself, and on to God.

Spending time with the same people, really getting to know them, sharing their joys and sorrows, really entering into their lives, and letting them into yours, begins to produce that precious thing called fellowship, something which goes beyond mere friendship - valuable as that may be - but becomes a deep sense of belonging to one another, with a real sense of mutual responsibility for one another's lives – it produces community, common participation in the Holy Spirit of God.

And that is where I come to my feelings of sadness. Because for the past 20 years, for whatever reasons – and I impugn no bad motives to anyone – Glastonbury tended to become less of a place of encounter, of hospitality, and instead a place where differences were noted and separateness the order of the day. Once, as I recall, all the bishops of the south west were invited here, such was not the case for far too long. And that is not only sad, but it is, as I have said, to miss out on a key aspect of pilgrimage, encounter – encounter with the other, that which is other than myself, in other people and in God. And the only place where such encounter is able to take place in a way that is

full of grace and truth is in love and penitence before Christ on the cross. Which is where I come to today's Gospel reading, and this year's theme.

'Behold your mother' says Jesus to the beloved disciple. *'Beloved disciple'* a name he also wishes to confer on you and me.

Our Lord hung on the cross suffering deep agony and pain. And yet how often during those dark three hours, his gaze and his words were turned to another, and not focused upon himself. He addressed words to, not only his heavenly father, but also to the penitent thief, to those who had persecuted him and brought him to the cross, and then to his mother, and to one of his disciples. Long ago when he was a mere boy his mother had been told that a sword would pierce her own heart and, looking down from the cross, this was exactly what he could see happening before his gaze.

The relationship between this mother and son had not always

been easy. There had been that occasion when the parents had had to rebuke the boy for staying in Jerusalem while they and their party had set out for the return journey to the north: *'My son, why have you treated us like this?'* (Lk 2.48). And **he** had had to rebuke **her** when, at the wedding feast, she had drawn his attention to the lack of wine. He had had to reply: *'That is no concern of mine. My hour has not yet come.'* (Jn 2.4) And it cannot have been easy for Mary to be kept waiting outside the house while he was teaching the crowd inside, and then for her to receive the message: *'Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and **mother.**'* (Mk 3.31-5) If Jesus felt the tension between the absolute demands of the heavenly father and the demands of his parents, we may be sure that Mary experienced that tension too. Such tensions as we struggled to reconcile obedience to our Father in heaven and loving commitment to those human communities of which that same God has made us apart are an inevitable part of human living, and not something simply to be abandoned or from which to flee.

But, now, all that is passed, and the end has nearly come. He is on the cross and she is at its foot. Soon she will be bereft, alone with her grief, her loss, her memories. No longer will she be able to look after his needs, the washing or the mending of his clothes, the provision of food for his journeys, all the little comfort she had loved to provide for him. What will she do without him in the long years that stretch ahead?

Then there was John – one of his disciples. Young, deeply sensitive, spiritually perceptive; his was the kind of nature which felt life's tragedies and bereavements more excruciatingly than does the ordinary run of humankind. Others of the 12 might be able to get on without the physical presence of their master – but John? The relationship between the man of 33 and the younger man, possibly hardly out of his teens, had been peculiarly close: here was the one that Jesus loved; now that closeness of relationship was about to be broken – by death. The parting was near. What would John do?

Two people in great need. Jesus looked down at them both, and his heart went out to them in the deep, self-forgetting compassion. Different from one another though Mary and John were, their primary needs were the same. Each would need companionship. Each would need work to do – a vocation to fulfil even in the midst of their loss.

And so they are given to one another. Mary needed another ‘son’ to love and to care for. John needed another ‘mother’ to protect and to guard and to love. So from the cross came the words of mutual commendation: *‘Mother there is your son. .’* and *‘There is your mother.’* And, *‘from that moment’*, the evangelist tells us, *‘the disciple took her into his home.’* (Jn 19.27)

Bereavement, loss, is about the most painful thing that can come the way of any of us, and it is so easy, so understandably easy, for the bereaved to slip into a slough of despond or self-pity. When things that have been precious seem to be disintegrating around us, when the things that have sustained us, and those whom we have believed to be at one with us, are with us no

more, then how easy for attention to turn to ourselves, and trust to seek solace in our isolation, anger, and grief.

And yet this story of Jesus - and his ministry, from the cross, to Mary and John, points in the direction of a healing answer: *‘turned to another in need’* it says to us. Turn your eyes from yourself to the Lord, and to those whom he will give you as companions on the way, even if it is difficult to see them as that at this particular time, because the Lord has gifted you with something to give to them. Such has always been the best understanding of those who have been called to live out the Catholic faith within the context of this Church of England. Over 150 years ago the Catholic revival within our church, of which this pilgrimage was, in due course, one of the fruits, came into being in order to help the whole church to discover its catholic identity. It was seen to exist for the purpose of witness to, and conversation with, all fellow members of the body of Christ. And how tragic it has been when those to whom such a vocation has been given, have placed themselves in a locked room for fear, talking only among themselves. As Father Philip

North has written so powerfully quite recently, ‘What *a mistake it has been to allow the Catholic movement to become a tradition within the church rather than a movement calling for the reform and renewal of the whole.*’

We are a pilgrim people, a people called to be companions to one another; and companions (meaning ‘*those who share bread with*’) to others on the way. Standing at the foot of the cross, our Lord says to us all: *Behold your mother. .*’ One mother, not many, the one mother, as the one Father of us all.

To be a Christian is to recognise that at the foot of the cross is born our family, from which no one can be excluded. We **are** brothers and sisters of each other. And to call someone your brother or sister is not just to state a relationship; it is the **proclamation** of reconciliation – but even more than a proclamation, a commitment to discovering, what in practice, that reconciliation means. It will not always be easy – where it is so, it would not, probably, be necessary. It involves a journey, a pilgrimage, in which our eyes are focused not upon ourselves,

but upon God, upon those whom he has given us as companions on the way, and upon the cross – for without that ahead, and constantly drawing our attention and our gaze, the path we travel is but a casual meandering through life, rather than a journey of longing to encounter – in the other – grace, mercy, truths, and love: made flesh for us in Christ, the word of God.

Isaiah 7.10-15 Isaiah Gives Ahaz the Sign of Immanuel

¹⁰ Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: 'Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

Acts 1.12-14 Matthias Chosen to Replace Judas

¹² Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. ¹³When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. ¹⁴All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

John 19.25-27

²⁵ Meanwhile, standing near the cross of Jesus were his mother, and his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene. ²⁶When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' ²⁷Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.