

26th Sunday (C)

25th September 2016

'The Shrine of Walsingham'

Amos 6: *Woe to those ensconced so snugly ... those who are bowed down.* Ps 145: *The Lord raises up those who are bowed down.*
1Tim 6: the duty of doing all that you have been told, with no faults or failures. Lk 16: 19–31: Dives & Lazarus

The parable of 'The Rich Man and Lazarus' is another example of the rich theology of St Luke with regard to mercy, and the living-out of compassion for the poor and marginalized: a great parable for us to reflect on in this Holy Year of Mercy! But today I wish to focus on something else, viz. the feast yesterday of Our Lady of Walsingham.

A couple of months ago, back in July, Westminster had its first diocesan pilgrimage in recent times to Walsingham, up near the north Norfolk coast. We had a full coach of pilgrims from here, and we braved the torrential morning rain during the open-air Mass, as well as the strong sunshine during the afternoon's procession along the 'Holy Mile.' It was, as any pilgrimage should be, worth the effort as an expression of our love and spiritual works for the Lord. But it may be that, for many of you, the mention of 'Walsingham' is meaningless, and you've never had a chance to know anything this devotion, and this

national shrine to Our Lady. I felt that this weekend, with the feast day itself having been yesterday, is an ideal opportunity to preach about Walsingham.

There are, of course, countless shrines in honour of Our Lady throughout the world. Think, for example, of Guadalupe, where Our Lady appeared to St Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531; Lourdes, in France, where Our Lady appeared to St Bernadette in 1858; Knock, in Ireland, where Our Lady appeared to about 15 parishioners in 1879; or Fatima, in Portugal, where Our Lady appeared to the three shepherd children in 1917. Walsingham also is the site of an apparition of Our Lady, but going much further back into history: the local noblewoman Richeldis de Faverches experienced a visitation from the Blessed Mother back in Saxon times, in 1061 — 5 yrs before even the Norman Conquest, and during the reign of our only canonized monarch, St Edward the Confessor. In her vision of Our Lady, Richeldis received instructions to build a Holy House, a copy of the home of the Holy Family in Nazareth, and she set about doing so. This replica of the Holy House formed

the centrepiece of a large priory of Augustinian canons which was established a century later on the site at Walsingham, and welcomed many pilgrims, rivalling the other great pilgrimage centres of mediaeval England: Glastonbury and Canterbury. Many of our kings and queens, from Henry III in 1241, to Henry VIII in 1513 came to Walsingham as pilgrims, to honour Our Lady and to support the upkeep of the shrine. It was a tragedy, then, that in 1538 the shrine was destroyed in the vicious ravages of the Reformation: this was just 25 years after the same king, Henry VIII, had visited it as a pilgrim! Walsingham, this centre of Marian devotion for almost 500yrs of our nation's history, was left to rack and ruin, the canons sent away from the priory, the shrine ransacked, and the ancient statue of Our Lady of Walsingham — in the traditional seated posture — was brought to London to be destroyed.

Devotion to Our Lady of Walsingham was not to be restored until 1897, when a new statue, modelled on the mediaeval one, was blessed by Pope Leo XIII. Catholic pilgrimage resumed that same year, using the ancient

‘Slipper Chapel,’ a mile outside Great Walsingham village, as the centre for Catholic devotions, as it still is today. The beautiful statue of Our Lady of Walsingham is honoured there, and is a reminder of our love for Mary which brings us into close communion with Jesus. Our own, bronze statue in the Lady Chapel, is modelled on that traditional seated image of Our Lady, and shows us that Mary always presents us with, and points us to, her divine Son.

Every country has its national shrine to Our Lady, but few nations have a shrine with as long a history as our own at Walsingham. Over the coming years, our Catholic shrine hopes to develop its facilities, to make it more welcoming; and, please God, the diocese will also choose to organise annually the Westminster pilgrimage. Honouring Our Lady, especially at a place where she herself has made an apparition, puts us directly in touch with the sacred intervention of God in human lives. Let's ask Our Lady, under her title of Walsingham, to pray for our country, that it may serve God more fervently, and keep our nation away from harm and the neglect of what is truly holy.