

5th Sunday (A)

9th February 2014

'Lourdes and Bernadette'

Is 58: 1Cor 2: Mt 5:13–16: salt of the earth ... light of the world ...

I don't know if you've had a chance to look in the Lady Chapel this evening/morning, yet, but in there you will find a lovely floral display to honour Our Lady of Lourdes. Kneeling below her, amongst the flowers, is St Bernadette; and across the shimmering blue, representing the mill-stream, in the niche above, is Our Lady, in the way she appeared to Bernadette back in 1858. The first apparition of Our Lady there was on 11th February, which is why we keep that date as the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes. Some of you may know well the events of Lourdes in 1858, but others may not, so I want to take the chance today to describe what happened, and to invite you also to consider coming to Lourdes later in the year, especially if you have never been, and have always wished to go.

The events of 1858 — February to July — took place in what by any reckoning was an utter backwater. A poor little village of France in the foothills of the Pyrenees mountains on the border with Spain. Bernadette herself was of a very poor family, and rather illiterate. The family of six lived in a single room in Lourdes which was so dingy that it was abandoned even as a prison cell. In order to escape the grinding poverty of

Lourdes, Bernadette went to the countryside to look after the sheep for a family friend when she was 13. But she so desired to make her first Holy Communion that she decided when she was 14 to return to her family in Lourdes. It was only a few days after returning that, whilst out with her sister and a friend to collect firewood down near the river, she first experienced the vision of Our Lady, although she did not know that it was Our Lady: in fact, she called the apparition at first, “aquero” = “it”, or “the thing,” although the vision was indeed of a lady unimaginably beautiful. For a fortnight, Our Lady appeared to Bernadette almost daily, in the 2nd half of February 1858. Gradually she revealed herself more to Bernadette, spoke to her, and asked her to do a number of things: to do penance, to wash in the water, to ask people to come in procession; and to ask the priest to build a chapel. The water which Our Lady indicated to Bernadette was the water that until then had never flowed before, but which springs up in the Back of the Grotto, and which nowadays feeds the baths and the taps where people wash and fill their bottles. As for the chapel, well, the priest was at first very sceptical, and unaware how he would ever find the money to build a chapel there. He asked Bernadette what the Lady's name was. Bernadette said she would ask her. Our

Lady did not reveal her name at first, but later, on the feast of the Annunciation, she did so. Here are Bernadette's own words:

I said again, "Would you be so kind as to tell me who you are?" I said this four times altogether.

The Lady extended her hands towards the ground, swept them upwards to join them on her heart, raised her eyes, but not her head to Heaven, leaned tenderly towards me and said, "Que soy era Immaculada Conception." She smiled at me. She disappeared. I was alone.

I did not understand the words, but I knew the Priest would. I knew also the Lady loved the Priest. Leaving my candle at the grotto, I went straight to Fr. Peyramale, saying the Lady's name to myself along the way. Father was waiting for me. I bowed and said, "I am the Immaculate Conception." Seeing his surprise, I explained, "Aguero said, 'I am the Immaculate Conception'."

The good Priest stood there stunned. Suddenly he stammered, "Do you know what that means?" I shook my head, I said "No."

"Then how can you say the words if you do not understand them?" "I repeated them all along the way," I replied, then added, "She still wants the chapel."

The Priest by now was deathly pale, but he pulled himself together, saying, "Go home now, child. I will see you another day."

Years later I learned that Father wrote to the Bishop that night, and as he wrote, his heart filled up with emotion, and his eyes filled up with tears.

From that moment on, of course, the Church authorities were fully convinced that Bernadette was indeed witnessing the appearance of the Mother of God herself.

The chapel was built, and much more besides. Even during those days of Bernadette's visions, some thousands would come to be with her at the Grotto. Nowadays, some 5 million pilgrims come each year to follow the example of Bernadette, to pray, to come in procession, to do penance, to wash in the waters: in this way to draw closer to Christ at the behest of Our Lady. I have been annually, more or less, since 1988, and will be going again this summer. The Westminster diocesan pilgrimage numbers about 700–1000 of our parishioners, and is a happy occasion, led by the Archbishop. I will be putting out leaflets about the pilgrimage as soon as I get them. This year's is the 25th Westminster pilgrimage, and it would be good if we could gather together a group from Hoddesdon. I will be going anyway, as I normally help with the sick pilgrims in the special accommodation (the 'St Frai') for those needing some nursing care. If anyone wants to know more about that special accommodation for sick or frail pilgrims, please ask me some time; fundraising is done by friends of the St Frai, to provide for discounts for such sick or needy pilgrims. May Our Lady of Lourdes pray for us all, and especially the sick members of our parish, and give us the hope that she gives to all the pilgrims to her shrine.