

Homily for the Solemnity of the assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Fr Robin Burgess writes

Dear Friends,

This weekend I should have been in Walsingham with a group on pilgrimage, but because of the current situation we have had to postpone it until next year in the hope that everything will be back to normal in twelve months' time. It often surprises me that many Catholic people who go to Lourdes, Fatima and Medjugorje have not been to Walsingham and sometimes have never heard of English's national shrine of Our Lady – even though its history goes back much further than those other places.

The legend is that in the year 1061, just before the Norman invasion of England, the Anglo-Saxon lady of the manor, Richeldis de Faverches, was given a vision of the Blessed Virgin Mary who asked her to build at Walsingham, a village in Norfolk, a replica of the house at Nazareth in which the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph lived. She would be shown the spot on which to build by a spring of water appearing where water had never been known before. The Holy House with its well became the centre of the shrine, a great abbey church being built to contain it as well as other religious houses and accommodation for pilgrims.

England in the Middle Ages was renowned for its devotion to Our Lady, with many shrines and churches in her honour. In the Ealing area where I live several of the ancient parish churches in what were once villages on that side of London were dedicated to St. Mary – West Twyford, Hanwell, Perivale, Northolt. After Canterbury and St. Thomas Becket Walsingham became one of the most popular sites of pilgrimage, most of the kings and queens of England making their way there at one time or another: Londoners who could not afford the long journey to Norfolk could visit instead Our Lady of Willesden.

The end came, inevitably, under Henry VIII, when the shrine was dissolved, its assets purloined and the buildings left to decay, but in the 20th century it was revived, both by the Church of England and the Catholic Church, and now pilgrims once more throng the Walsingham Way. If you have never been do consider going there when you can, either as part of an organized pilgrimage or on your own visit. Walsingham is a few miles south of the north coast of Norfolk, which is a good place also for holidays: our week usually includes a day's outing to the nearby seaside resort of Cromer, famous for its crab salads!

People go on pilgrimage, I imagine, for a variety of reasons: maybe in hope of a miraculous cure, to give a boost to their prayer and spiritual life, but always to catch something of what has drawn people over the centuries to a place like Walsingham – the belief that as an ordinary country village it has been marked out by an extraordinary visitation of God. God's presence is not confined to special places, but if we can connect with him in a special place, we can hope to connect with him wherever we are.

Last week was the feast of the Transfiguration, when the disciples saw Jesus radiant in glory on the hill-top, an amazing revelation to them of God's being and nature, but then they had to go back down to the workaday world and somehow allow that vision to inform their regular life on the plain. In a similar way what we experience on pilgrimage to a holy site can guide and inspire our life when we return and carry on with our daily life: this really is its purpose.

The element of the journey is an important part of pilgrimage. It reminds us of the journey of life on which we are all engaged, and just as we have a destination we are making for on a pilgrimage, so too our life in general needs a destination, an aim or end we have in view to give meaning, point and purpose to our lives. The feast of the Assumption which we are keeping on this Sunday shows what the destination of our life will be.

The Virgin Mary has her own special vocation unique to herself which nobody else can share. No other human person can be the mother of God's son, no-one else has been preserved free from sin, no-one else has been instantaneously taken up to heaven when their earthly life was ended. But these special gifts to Mary are all ones that we do share in our own way. We are all called to "bear" Christ in ourselves, to live his human-divine life in our human make-up and by doing so present him to the world. In baptism we are given the Holy Spirit to protect us from sin so that we can fulfil our ministry as God's people. When we die our hope is that we will come to share the Resurrection life of the risen Lord. So Mary in her God-given vocation is both unique and representative of all humanity.

Belief in the Assumption of Our Lady is very ancient, even if not attested to in Scripture. It is said to be "fitting" that the mother of Christ should not suffer the dissolution of the body, but on her death be immediately raised to heaven. The preface for the Eucharistic Prayer at the Mass of this feast says of the Lord, 'rightly you would not allow her to see the corruption of the tomb since from her own body she marvelously brought forth your incarnate Son, the Author of

all life.' Her Assumption is 'the beginning and image of your Church's coming to perfection and a sign of sure hope and comfort to your pilgrim people.'

In country areas like Norfolk the feast of the Assumption is sometimes known as Our Lady in Harvest, as the date 15 August occurs when the ripe crops are being harvested. Our lives in a sense are harvested when they reach maturity by coming to our destination in God's kingdom. So the unique privilege of Our Lady is indeed a sign of hope and comfort to God's people as we journey towards him, showing what we too hope to be. In the meantime, as we look forward to that end, we continue to live our Christian ministry and service of following Christ in the circumstances of our daily life.

The famous verse in the prologue of St. John's Gospel, 'And dwelt among us,' uses a Greek word which really means 'pitched his tent among us.' A tent is a temporary dwelling which we put up at the end of a day's journeying and then pack up the next day to carry with us as we travel on. The Gospel therefore seems to be suggesting that God's presence is not fixed and static, but that he goes with us wherever we go. We can know that presence in special places like Walsingham and look forward to knowing it fully and completely in the hereafter, but we also know it in the here and now as God accompanies us on our journey through life, feeding us, nurturing us with himself so that we can grow more and more into the likeness of his Son so as to be raised with him to eternal glory. All this we celebrate in this feast of Our Lady.

Wishing you a happy Assumption Day!

Fr Robin is happy to receive any comments or questions you may have. He can be contacted at robinburgess@rcdow.org.uk