

Dear Friends,

Before I was received into the Catholic Church in 1994 my last appointment in the Church of England was to the parish of West Twyford, which lies between Ealing and Park Royal. It is recorded in the Domesday Book in 1086, which means that its history probably goes back even further in time. I reckoned that from the 11th century on it remained a small agricultural settlement on the banks of the river Brent with a population of about a hundred, until in the 1930s the surrounding area started to be built up and the population increased rapidly. Some of my older parishioners could remember their families moving out of central parts before the expansion took place, to go and live in the countryside at West Twyford!

The little church was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, one of several ancient parishes on that side of London, once separate villages, that had churches in her honour - Perivale, Northolt, Hanwell: the only exception is Greenford, where Mary has a secondary dedication alongside the Holy Cross. This reflects the great devotion to Our Lady that was characteristic of England in the late Middle Ages, before the Reformation. It was even known as Our Lady's Dowry, a title ascribed to King Richard II, who, in thanksgiving for delivery from the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, devoted his realm to the Queen of Heaven as her dowry.

As well as the many churches dedicated in her honour England had a large number of pilgrimage shrines to Mary. The best known was Walsingham, but there were many others: Londoners who could not afford the long journey to Norfolk could visit instead Our Lady of Willesden, another devotion revived in recent times. At the time of writing I am just about to take a group on pilgrimage to Walsingham, the Catholic Church's national shrine of Our Lady, whose origins go back to the Saxon period in 1061, on the eve of the Norman conquest. It often strikes me that people will go on pilgrimage to Lourdes or Fatima or Medjugorje, but not Walsingham: sometimes they have not even heard of it, and yet the shrine there is much older than those more recent devotions.

The church at West Twyford had an ancient title of Our Lady of the Assumption, St. Mary the Virgin, another common English designation. The feast of the Assumption which we keep on this Sunday was also known as Our Lady in Harvest, since it occurs at the height of the wheat harvest, so vital to our wellbeing even now. In the agricultural society of days gone by the calendar of the Church and people's religious life were very much interwoven with the natural world and its seasons. Another example I like is that people used to keep what were called "church sheep." These were not, as you might expect, sheep to graze in the churchyard to keep the grass down, but extra sheep over and above their own that people would rear in order to sell them to buy candles and vestments and other requisites for the church.

In the 21st century world of technology and electronic communication we have lost the age-old connection with the world of nature, but we cannot escape its importance for us. It has been pointed out that one effect of the pandemic, as the pace of life has had to slow down, is that people are becoming more aware of the world around them. And there is much to see! Going around this summer, when driving to St. Vincent's on Sundays for instance, I have noticed how well provided this part of London is with trees. Many suburban streets are lined with the London plane and other trees, often growing to great height and size and most attractively shaped: a fine sight to behold!

Part of the attraction of nature for us is, I think, its *givenness*, the fact that we did not create it, but God did and made it to be our home and furnish so many of the things we need for a satisfying way of life, even just the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of looking on nature. But however important it is, our destiny as human beings is not to remain within the endless cycles of nature, of birth and life and death, but break out of them in order to be born anew into the eternal life of the resurrected Lord.

A pilgrimage to a holy place 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 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.'

Our Lady in Harvest reminds us that 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.

We can know the presence of God 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!