

The Pilgrimage of Our Lady of Walsingham

A Sermon at Solemn Pontifical Mass, 10.30am 13 October 2018
by The Rev'd C J Arnold, rector of Trinity Episcopal Church, Oshkosh

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

~ The History ~

Walsingham: "Where shall be had in a memorial, the great joy of my salutation.
First of my joy's ground and original root of mankind's gracious redemption
when Gabriel gave to me relation to be a mother through humility
and God's son conceived in virginity."

You know the history.

In 1951 was the first pilgrimage here. In 1930, Grace Church's rector Father A. Parker Curtiss created the shrine here. It was the first Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham outside of the UK.

The Shrine here is of course an off-shoot of the complex of pilgrim destinations in Walsingham, England, just north of Norwich near the Norfolk coast. It is part of the modern restoration and expansion of devotion to our Lady of Walsingham that has been going on since 1875. That was the year that an old poem called the Pynson Ballad was discovered and published. It told the story of the shrine. That's what I quoted right at the beginning. Both Roman Catholic and Anglican Christians were drawn to Walsingham. Buildings were purchased and restored. New churches and chapels and pilgrim hostels were constructed. Eventually a medal was discovered in a museum that showed us what the shrine church looked like, and on the other, the original statue that we now know and love, the statue of our shrine here, and the image which is on the cover of your booklet. We had the story, and now we had the images.

This was fantastic, for without that image we wouldn't have known. The original statue was destroyed along with the abbey church at Walsingham on the orders of Henry the VIII, orders given only 27 year after he had made his own pilgrimage there to give thanks for the birth of a son. Henry had changed. It was a time of change.

Henry was not the only pilgrim. For 400 years pilgrims flocked there. It ranked with Rome, Jerusalem, Compostella, and Canterbury among the great Catholic destinations. Of all the pilgrimages, this was the one dedicated to Mary, which fact combined with the great depth of devotion to the blessed mother in the writings of English Christians so that England became known around Europe as "Our Lady's Dowry".

From its original humble origins, the actual shrine had grown rapidly and extensively. Pilgrims from the 12th to the 16th centuries found a massive priory enclosing the shrine, in the care of Augustinian canons, and hostels and inns to handle the crowds.

And all of this, because of a vision. In 1061, our Lady Saint Mary appeared three times in a dream to a Richeldis of Faverches, a devout woman, a widow, and lady of the manor of Walsingham. I wish to share the joy of the Annunciation, said our Lady to Richeldis. And thus Richeldis was to build a copy of the house at Nazareth, where Mary was raised by St. Joachim and St. Anna, and where Mary was visited by the Archangel Gabriel. And so it was built, the Holy House.

Because Mary wished to share the joy of the Annunciation.

This was, after all, a kind of big bang in the story of salvation. This is the moment, the precise moment, when heaven and earth are joined. It is the moment when the eternal word which molded and shaped the creation became Jesus, the one who was born to die, to die that he might rise again, and to be conceived in the Virgin's womb that he might be born.

Walsingham and its focus on the joy of Annunciation surely must play a large part in the molding and shaping of English Christianity, for many have noted that we are particularly Incarnational sort of Christianity. And by English Christianity I do include our own Episcopal Church — for as much as modern pressures have tried to turn us into generic mainline American protestants, our roots are deep in the spiritual soil of the British Isles. We adore the cross, we rejoice at his resurrection, we heed his teachings, but above all we bow in profound wonder at Christ's birth. We are a Christmas people. And we cannot have Christmas without Mary.

~Missionaries for Mary ~

And so, part of this pilgrimage, this festival, is to be missionary. I want you to become gentle yet firm Missionaries for the Blessed Mother here within our Episcopal Church, and beyond.

Here are some points to remember and to embrace and to proclaim:

1.

When speaking with other Christians, do not begin by defending your favorite beliefs about Mary.

It is fascinating how you can in a sense trace the entirety of the story of Christian theology just by looking at all the things we've said and claimed about Mary.

Was she indeed a virgin when Jesus was conceived, or when he was born, or for ever after?

Is she rightly called *theotokos*, bearer of God, or simply *Christotokos*, bearer of Christ?

Is she immaculate, meaning completely free from sin in body and soul?

Did she conclude her natural life in Dormition or Assumption, or just an ordinary death?

It is possible to get into very complicated arguments about these points. And probably any evidence you give for any position will be greeted warmly by those who already agree with you, and those who disagree with you will only get annoyed.

Take the discussion about the Immaculate Conception of Mary — this one a particularly rich field of debate, involving no less than St. Augustine and St. Bernard of Clairvaux and Duns Scotus and nearly 1400 years of discussion.

Even in this room we could probably carve ourselves up in all sorts of ways, and thus we would ruin the beautiful unity of this holy event. Let us strive for the same sort of unity with our brothers and sisters who have less devotion to our blessed mother than we do.

If we are to be missionaries of Mary, let us share first our joy and our love for her, and leave the debates to Augustine and Bernard.

2.

I said before it is possible to trace much of Christian theology through Christian mariology. As the foremost of the saints, naturally, what we believe and teach about Christ shapes what we believe about his mother.

I feel it needs to be said: that though Mary is the first of the saints, the new Eve, the bearer of God, blessed and full of grace, it doesn't make her the perfect role model for all women. I feel it needs to be said, certainly because we are in an era where women are claiming the fullness of their vocations, both in the church as well as the secular sphere. For too long and in too many places women have had to fight much harder than they should have to do. I feel it needs to be said because it's the gospel truth:

To honor Mary is not to claim that there is only one kind of valid womanhood. Between her purity and virginity on one hand, and the fact that she is blessed in her child-bearing, Mary has at times been held up as the perfect example of the only legitimate way to be a woman. This is not good. It was Mary's life. It is not the life for all her sisters.

Indeed, I said this is a Gospel truth. It is literally found in the gospel, in Luke chapter 11:

“a woman in the crowd raised her voice and said ‘Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you.’ But Jesus said, ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and obey it.’”

And there, in a nutshell, Jesus fixes our understanding. Mary is the handmaid of the Lord, but this isn't the Handmaid's Tale. It's not her womb, but her will that is the cause of her blessedness.

3.

And here it is that Episcopalians and Anglican on the catholic end of the spectrum can find common understanding with those on the protestant end: We may disagree on assumption or her conception or her virginity and how long it lasted (and frankly it has always seemed ungracious of me to think too much about it), but it should be easy to agree that Mary exemplifies the life of discipleship.

She does what we are each called to do: to hear the word of God, and obey it.

For her, it meant one thing; for me, another; for you, still another. Narrow is the gate that leadeth to life, but once you pass through there are a thousand paths towards our union with God. The Spirit leads us each on our own journey. I've always maintained that is a blessing of the communion of saints — we get to see so many different ways for a life to be Christ-shaped. I could never be a Christian in a church without saints. I need the encouragement, and the example, and the diversity. I need to see that this challenging life of discipleship is possible, and manifold in its variety. You do too, I'm sure of it.

And of all the saints, Mary is the foremost. Without her, none of it would have been possible. No Jesus. No crucifixion or resurrection. No church, neither in Bethlehem, nor Jerusalem, nor Nazareth, nor Walsingham, nor Sheboygan. No mass. No gospel. No salvation. No hope.

I'm sure God would have found another way to figure it out. God's quite clever that way. But I sure am glad that Mary heard the word of God, and obeyed it.

Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.

Our Lady of Walsingham, show us always the joy of the annunciation, and pray for us.
Amen.