

**The address given by The Rt Revd Bernard Longley, Archbishop of Birmingham**

**WALSINGHAM FESTIVAL : COVENTRY CATHEDRAL  
8 DECEMBER 2018**

***Be joyful, be glad forever at what I am creating***

I am most grateful to the Master and Warden of the Anglican Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham for inviting me to join you at today's Midlands Regional Festival here in Coventry Cathedral. I also thank Bishop Christopher and the Dean for making us very much at home here in Coventry and for the many lasting and fruitful ecumenical friendships that they have fostered within and beyond the city. Bishop Christopher welcomed me when I first arrived in Birmingham in 2009 and I have greatly valued his friendship and encouragement.

I am also very grateful for the presence here today of Mgr John Armitage, Rector of the Roman Catholic Shrine at Walsingham. It is another sign of our commitment to work together and pray in Walsingham for the unity of the Church.

Coventry Cathedral is an important and historic venue and it is particularly poignant to gather here during the year in which we have commemorated the centenary of the Armistice which brought the First World War to an end. With its focus on reconciliation and its Chapel of Unity it has enabled Christians from many traditions to deepen in their faith in Jesus Christ and today it draws us together in devotion to his blessed mother.

The magnificent tapestry at the east end of the sanctuary is a meditation on Christ and on his relationship with his heavenly Father, from whom he has received all that he is, body, blood, soul and divinity. Its imagery reminds us most powerfully that the humanity of Christ is the sacrament of the divine presence and that the Father willed that this human nature should come through Mary.

Mary is the Mother of Christ, *theotokos* or God-bearer, so that Christ may be the Word made flesh, the fullness of God's presence among us. Our Lady is thereby the Mother of all those who are re-born in Christ through baptism, Mother of the Body of Christ, the Church. When we invoke Mary as Mother of the Church, we encompass in our prayer the comprehensive scope of her Motherhood and its embracing nature.

Our Lady has a special relationship with all who are baptised, irrespective of the particular ecclesial tradition from which we come. But, like her Son, she cannot be indifferent to the divisions that hold us apart. Jesus's prayer *that they may all be one* is also her prayer for us. It must be so, for she prays in the same Holy Spirit sent by her Son, the Holy Spirit who is the source of our unity as the Son is the source of our life.

Mary's relationship with the Church flows from her motherhood of Jesus Christ, for she is the mother of the Body of Christ as well as its first member. Mary was present at the birth of the Church when the promise of Christ to send his Holy Spirit was fulfilled. We recall the day of Pentecost when Mary was praying with the apostles as together they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit.

On this feast of her Immaculate Conception we recall that from the beginning of her life Our Lady was filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, held uniquely close to God as the immaculate virgin Mary. In the 2004 ARCIC Agreed Statement *Mary: Grace and Hope in Christ* there is a reflection on this teaching:

*Within this biblical framework we have considered afresh the distinctive place of the Virgin Mary in the economy of grace, as the one who bore Christ, the elect of God. The word of God delivered by Gabriel addresses her as already 'graced', inviting her to respond in faith and freedom to God's call (Luke 1:28,38,45). The Spirit is operative within her in the conception of the Saviour, and this "blessed among women" is inspired to sing "all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:42,48). Viewed eschatologically, Mary thus embodies the 'elect Israel' of whom Paul speaks - glorified, justified, called, predestined. This is the pattern of grace and hope which we see at work in the life of Mary, who holds a distinctive place in the common destiny of the Church as the one who bore in her own flesh 'the Lord of glory'. Mary is marked out from the beginning as the one chosen, called and graced by God through the Holy Spirit for the task that lay ahead of her. (§54)*

The Agreed Statement continues: *The eschatological perspective illuminates our understanding of Mary's person and calling. In view of her vocation to be the mother of the Holy One (Luke 1:35), we can affirm together that Christ's redeeming work reached 'back' in Mary to the depths of her being, and to her earliest beginnings. This is not contrary to the teaching of Scripture, and can only be understood in the light of Scripture. Roman Catholics can recognize in this what is affirmed by the dogma - namely "preserved from all stain of original sin" and "from the first moment of her conception."* (§59)

The Gospels record that our Lady was to receive the Holy Spirit in her life on more than one occasion for a particular purpose related to God's plan for the salvation of the human race. So at the time of the annunciation, which the shrine at Walsingham commemorates so powerfully, the Holy Spirit came down upon Our Lady and she conceived the Word made flesh.

At that moment the Holy Spirit gave Mary a unique role in the story of our own redemption and in this we have the beginning of our personal relationship with her through her Son. Those who are baptised into the death and resurrection of Christ become his brothers and sisters and in this we also become spiritual children of Mary his mother. That relationship deepens when we go as pilgrims to Walsingham.

We see Mary united with the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit once again. This time that gift is given so as to bring about another birth – not the incarnation of Christ but the birth of his Body the Church and our Lady is at the heart of this birth too.

Mary becomes a witness to the Good News in a new and different way alongside the apostles. She receives the Spirit of unity and truth and for her and the twelve this is a moment of communion with each other. They are bound to one another and to her Son in the mission that is now entrusted to the Church to be the great witness to Christ's presence throughout the whole world.

Our Lady's experience reveals something to us of the way the Holy Spirit is at work in our own lives. We also receive the gift of the Holy Spirit on more than one occasion, not only for our own good and to make us personally holy, but so as to further the Church's mission.

We received the Holy Spirit sacramentally at baptism in order to set our feet on the pathway of faith. At confirmation we were given the Holy Spirit's seven gifts to strengthen us as we undertook our mission to be witnesses to Christ in our daily lives. In Walsingham we are united with Mary in witnessing to her Son and we come to see our own role as individual believers and as an ecclesial family more clearly.

We live in a world that is beset by many turmoils and by divisions that run deep. These are places where the presence of the Holy Spirit is needed to bring healing, forgiveness and unity among people. We pray especially today for peace in those parts of the world that are acutely troubled, especially in Syria and across the Holy Land. In communion with Walsingham as England's Nazareth we should always remember to pray for the Christian communities of the Holy Land that face such a struggle to exist and whose mission is so vital.

Walsingham always encourages us to draw close to our Lady, especially during the Eucharist. When we hear the words of Christ: *This is my Body... This is my Blood* we catch in them an echo of other words from the Cross: *This is your mother*. There is something profoundly eucharistic about Christ's gift to us of his own mother and we embrace that gift as we receive his Eucharistic blessing today. Mary never comes between us and her Son – the memory of her example as his first and most faithful witness always leads us into his presence.

Mary, witness to the Good News, accompany us on our pilgrimage today. Stay with us as we strive for the unity of the Church. Pray that the prayer of your Son may become effective in us *that we may all be one*.