

**Sermon given by The Rt Revd and Rt Hon Justin Welby, Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, at the National Pilgrimage of the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham on Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2019**

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

The heart of our day is with the words of Mary, “do whatever he tells you”, a summary of the gospel that moves us from the watery drudgery of law to the joy and celebration of the Spirit. A pilgrimage is a joyful thing, where the journey itself is as important as the destination. Pilgrimage is full of surprises. Two years ago, I went on what is pompously and grandly called ‘An Official Visit’ to the Holy Land and found I was on a Pilgrimage.

The pilgrimage reality was shown in the surprises: From the Orthodox priest in Gaza who each day would have to prepare himself for that day being his last; to the English Jewish woman who had come at the time of the formation of the State of Israel and from a hill full of stones been one of those who created a Kibbutz. Despite the suffering and the battles and the loss of family in Auschwitz, she still trusted in God; To others who unexpectedly spoke of Jesus Christ. With others, with God, with God through others, who were strangers and became fellow pilgrims, the visit became a moment of calling. And that is my prayer for today for you. That it will be a moment of calling to do whatever He tells you.

It is wonderful to see so many of you here today from such a wide variety of places. You have travelled here, perhaps just this morning as I did, or perhaps over several days. I have trodden the pilgrim path to Walsingham before, but this is my first time here at the National. It may not feel like it when one is trudging in the rain or has sore feet, but for centuries pilgrims have been active in their pilgrimage - making their journeys to Walsingham, to Canterbury, to Rome, the Compostela - more nearly to experience the presence of God. More people are on pilgrimage across Europe today than even in the Middle Ages. The road to Compostela is crowded.

We had a pilgrim who started from Canterbury with our wonderful Dean, Dean Robert, who sent him off and said: ‘May I send you off with a blessing and a prayer for pilgrimage?’ And he said, ‘Well you can do what you like, I don’t believe in God!’ So he sent him off with a prayer, and the guy smiled politely. Dean Robert received a postcard from Rome about four months later saying, ‘You prayed for me. I began as a walker and an atheist, and I ended as a pilgrim and a Christian’. This is what pilgrimage does.

So the beautiful passage from Isaiah, written to a people in slave labour camps outside Babylon, speaks of the restoration of Israel, and of God rejoicing in his people as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride. That rejoicing is physical, and sensual, and full of promise and hope and abundantly overflowing with limitless pleasure. It is the result of God’s restoration of His people, His sovereign act of making them what they should be. It is an act that is public – it was then, it is now – before all the world, it is a vindication.

None can deny that today in the Church, in so many parts of the world and in this country especially, we need such a work of visitation, of vindication and

remembering. It is why we turn to God in prayer in the days after Ascension Day, praying, “Thy Kingdom Come” in so many languages, in so many countries, in so many parts of our church, from the comfortable to the persecuted, the complacent to the faithful.

As the narrative story of the Gospels unfolds the role and place of Mary changes. In the stories of the annunciation and the birth of Jesus she is centre stage: co-operating with God’s divine plan, guaranteeing the humanity of Christ and nurturing Emmanuel – God with us – in infancy and childhood. As the story unfolds so Mary is mentioned less frequently as Jesus comes to the fore. As the wonderful story of the Christ develops Mary steps back but she is never far away. She rushes back to the Temple to find the 12-year-old Jesus, worried for his safety; she hovers outside the synagogue where he is teaching waiting to take him home if he gets into trouble; and she is present, we remember today, at a point of great need – the wedding at Cana, where the wine ran out, as she will be present some years later at the foot of the cross, as a sword cuts her own heart also.

In her initial response to Elizabeth, the Magnificat, God’s purpose in the creation and the incarnation is found, His whole calling to His people, our entire social ethic. We have a prophetic vision of how society should work in the Kingdom of God, and we can tell that it is God’s prophetic vision because when we take it seriously and speak it out convincingly, well then we get into big trouble! Praise God, because it threatens the powerful. It threatens those who are comfortable. It says, as Jean Vanier used to say, that the strong need the weak in order to find Jesus Christ.

In her life with Jesus there is the drama of incarnate discipleship, that world changing drama in which we are all players, in which we are called to take the hand of God and be instrumental in His purpose of renewal, of justice, of equity, of caring with the poor, of being instrumental in God’s purpose of renewal and of joyful celebration in preparation for the return of Christ.

When Mary speaks it is always prophetic, the prophecy of obedience to God that is the consolation of His people. When Mary speaks the cosmos shakes, history reverberates and we see afresh that God remembers His people. Truly she is to be called blessed.

So at Cana of Galilee, we see prayer as in her humanity she first hints and then asks. We see the revelation of the coming of the Spirit, of law transformed into liberation as the water of purification becomes the wine of joy.

Our Lady, the Blessed Virgin, is God’s place-maker. She makes a place in her body for the incarnation. She makes place in her life for the moment of conception, of birth, of persecution, of protecting the God who needs feeding and changing, nurturing and teaching. She makes place for Him at Nazareth and in the Temple. She makes a place in mind and heart to consider what all this means.

And then she makes place for His ministry. Always present, from conception to crucifixion, she is yet never seeking her own self-interest. The mother of the Lord is not seen as demanding status. How different to the too frequent history of the church demanding rights. To each of us, especially those of us who hold authority and office in the church, who find it so easy to be affronted, so easy to feel we must stand on our

dignity. And yet how similar she is, how inspiring to those who follow Jesus closely, how we see in them the reality of Mary's love.

Pope Francis, a few weeks back at the Vatican, knelt before war lords and a President, begging the warring rulers of South Sudan to make peace; kissing their feet as they said 'no, no, no'. What echoes that brought. That was so powerful because the Holy Father, like Mary, demonstrated the Kingdom of Heaven in all its upside-down rightness and righteousness.

And Mary makes place in this world including, especially, here at Walsingham. They are thin places where she comes, open to the Spirit of God, and a reminder that we are pilgrims and strangers. As in her life she pointed always to Jesus and to obedience, "do whatever he tells you" so here the consequence of pilgrimage is that we are to see Jesus more clearly, to find more conclusively that we are indeed remembered by God and forgiven and most of all we are to be filled with joy and love as we encounter the God who rejoices in us. And the command to 'do whatever he tells you' comes down to us too. We encounter the God who loves us, but we encounter the God who gives us work to do.

Which takes us to the epistle reading, to Paul's vision of diversity in the Kingdom that is the proliferation of gifts and joys in the life of the church.

Paul is calling for action. The church for which Mary prays is not pietistic, sitting waiting for something to happen, it is fulfilling the *missio dei*, the mission of God. It is living in the Spirit, full of love and care for each other, seeing the reality of God in the Spirit present, giving gifts to each for the common good.

God remembers his people and gives us the means to do His mission. Mary made the place for Jesus who sends the Spirit to His people, and in coming to her places of visitation we are pointed to the generosity of God who made her to be called blessed throughout the generations, and led her into a uniquely intimate understanding of both the humanity and divinity of Jesus the Son, born with her obedience through the power of the Spirit in the call of the Father.

To be pointed to generosity is one thing. To respond with open-hearted receiving is quite another.

In a recent visit to the Vatican – that one for the South Sudan – I was invited to a drink with one of those who lives there (not the Pope!). We walked quickly through corridors painted by Raphael. You wanted to spend about an hour in each one and I had roughly 30 seconds. We eventually passed through a museum area with some armour. It was splendid, beautiful, but superfluous, to be preserved but no longer of use.

In our ignorance, in our forgetfulness in the church, we turn the generosity of God the Spirit into the benevolence of a donation to a museum. The gifts of the Spirit are so often treated like that armour – the benefits of those of long ago and far away, whose uses and value we do not really understand – but they really look lovely.

How different from the ministry of Mary. She welcomed the gift of being the *theotokos*, the God bearer, but did not consider in any way that to be something for

herself. She existed for others, for you and me, as she still prays for us. She could have protected Jesus, kept Him hidden even into adulthood. She could have sought advantage from knowing Him, from being His mother. Yet she welcomed the sword that pierced her own heart, and so liberated him at Cana that the road to the Cross became clear, and the road to our salvation established and the road to joy in the gifts and presence of the Spirit was before us.

We are the joy of the Lord, however unlikely it may seem looking at us. Not for ourselves are we his joy, or for one part of the church, one tradition, but in all our humanity we are His joy for He has made us so. We are His disciples, called to obedience through the obedience of Mary, who was the means of our transformation. We are His people to rejoice in His gifts so that we may do His work. We never exist for ourselves but only for others, like Mary, making space for the visibility of the Kingdom.

We exist in the love that came through her obedience, we act in the ethics and values that she proclaimed in her prophetic words, we humble ourselves in her pattern, we find space to meet God in places where she has made a place, we rejoice because she made place for the God of cross and resurrection, of Ascension and Pentecost. We rejoice and we live in the joy of which she was the first bearer, and for all this we call her Blessed.