**Westminster Abbey Walsingham Festival**

What on earth just happened? What have we just done?

Before we answer that we need to say an enormous thank you to the Dean of Westminster and his colleagues who have thrown this extraordinary place open to us pilgrims, united by our deep love for Mary under her Title Our Lady of Walsingham. What a place to be, and what wonderful generosity that we should be here.

But what has that generosity enabled us to do? Into this great Abbey church - the Shrine of St Edward the Confessor, the burial site of kings, the place of coronations and regal power - we have just carried a penniless peasant girl from Nazareth. Into this great symbol of our national life - the location for the spectacular events that define our nation, grand weddings, sombre memorials, huge state occasions - we have carried a woman who in her own life knew only occupation, poverty and political oppression.

Into this place of breath-taking beauty, of astonishing artistic endeavour and enduring aesthetic excellence we have held high a woman who knew only the hovels and shanty dwellings of the agricultural labourer. Into the heart of Westminster – the place of political power and one currently riven with deadlock, anger and intense soul-searching - we place a teenage girl.

What have we just done? As the image of Our Lady of Walsingham was carried into this Abbey, we have placed Mary back at the heart of our Nation. She sits now, proud and magnificent, in this Abbey church which, with its history, its beauty, its lively contemporary ministry, is the greatest symbol of England.

And we are not putting her here in some innovative or original act. No, we are putting her *back*, for this nation has always been Mary’s. Many of the monarchs who lie here loved Our Lady, many of them indeed would have made the pilgrimage to Walsingham that is so familiar to us. We don’t have to go back many years to find this land littered with her Shrines. Countless of its Parish Churches and numerous of its Cathedrals are dedicated to her and to her glorious Assumption.

Perhaps most dramatically, in 1381 in this very building, at the Shrine of Our Lady of Pew, King Richard II dedicated England as the Dowry of Mary. This nation has already been given as a gift to the Virgin of Nazareth. Next year the Roman Catholic Community will offer an Act of Re-Dedication. Today we do the same simply by bringing Mary here into this Abbey and so placing her back at the heart of the life of this nation.

But what does it mean to place Mary back at the heart of our national life? This huge prophetic act that we have just witnessed – what is it saying? It sets before our nation and her Church three challenges.

First, as Mary stands here she challenges us to be a nation that is holy to God. This nation has for centuries stood at the forefront of technological advances, it created the democratic systems that have been imitated across half the world, it carried the Gospel of Jesus Christ around the globe. Yet alarmingly our national life is increasingly characterised not by pride but by shame and embarrassment.

We seem to spend a great deal of time apologising for our country and the sins of her past. We mock and abuse our democratic institutions, and increasingly deride and pillory our politicians. We expect our sportsmen and women to fail. The cloak of despondency has fallen upon us. Taking pride in our nation seems deeply unfashionable, increasingly portrayed as the remit of the extreme right.

Why? Because a post-Christian and deeply secular nation has forgotten what it is. We have lost our purpose. What is our nation for? Some might argue that the purpose of this country is enduring prosperity and the power that comes with it. But how tedious is that? Whilst a lack of wealth might render life miserable, a surfeit of it will never bring fulfilment.

Others might answer the question with a set of British values such that you see plastered over the walls of school classrooms – believe in yourself, respect other people, be nice and so on. But values have no power to transform when they are not rooted in a compelling narrative. What is our nation for? We can no longer answer that question and so we sink into soul-searching and gloomy introspection.

Today Mary gives us the answer. For as we place her in this place, she points us to her child who is still incarnate in his Church and who, through the lives of those who follow him – our lives - claims this land as his own. Only in relationship with him does human life find its purpose and its goal.

In him we see that this is a nation that is holy to God. This is land set apart to his glory and for the building up of his kingdom of peace. ‘I will not cease from mental fight, nor shall my sword sleep in my hand till we have built Jerusalem in England’s green and pleasant land.’ As we Christians reclaim England for Jesus Christ, so we reclaim it for itself. As we place Mary in this Abbey Church, we claim our nation as one holy to God.

Second, as we place Mary in this place, she challenges us to be a nation that loves justice. Because a nation that truly loves Mary can never abandon its poor.

It is no surprise that a nation that is moving away from the Gospel is also one of ever growing social inequality. Whilst the wealth of this vast city and of other large cosmopolitan areas grows exponentially, increasing numbers of people are left behind. The northern towns from which so many of our pilgrims to Walsingham are drawn have been going backwards for decades, lives blighted by low paid work, a lack of aspiration and cuts in services. In this, the fifth largest economy in the world, 3.5 million children are being brought up in poverty, half a million are dependent on the soul-crashing indignity of the foodbank.

In the face of this, usually we do nothing. Or sometimes we leap to well-intentioned acts of volunteering, ‘doing things for the poor’ which unwittingly keep them in poverty. Foodbanks may be necessary, but they also create a culture of dependency which prevents people from taking control of their own lives.

Today, to this nation and from this place, Mary sings her prophetic song of justice. ‘He has put down the mighty from their thrones and has exalted the humble and meek.’ Mary challenges us to build a nation of justice, one where the poor are not just served but are empowered, one where structures aren’t just tinkered with but are transformed.

And it can begin with us. On many of our outer estates, the church is all that is left and many of those churches are in the Catholic tradition. That gives us authority to sing Mary’s song of justice. We sing that song as we raise up new leaders and discern vocations from our urban areas, setting crushed people free to use their gifts as God intends. We sing that song as we build up and support family life, helping the young to understand that they are held in the arms of Jesus. We sing that song as we act as the conscience of a nation, pointing out injustice and meeting human need. As we place her in this great Abbey church, Mary challenges us to be a nation that loves justice.

And third, as we place Mary in this place, she challenges us to be a nation that does what He tells us. At the wedding in Cana, in the midst of a crisis, Mary simply points to her son and invites the servants to attend to Him. So today, as we place Mary in a Westminster rocked by uncertainty and frustration, in the midst of a nation caught up in soul-searching, in a church locked in futile introspection, she points us all to Jesus and says, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’

And what does Jesus say? Not words. Just wine. A banquet without measure. The outrageous abundance of the Kingdom. The limitless joy of life in him. A way of being human that our timebound minds can barely conceive because it is eternity. As we place Mary here, we commit our lives anew to offering that great gift – the gift of Jesus himself - to this nation. Our God-given task is to invite the people of our land to meet Jesus, to meet him above all in the Eucharist. We cannot avoid that task just because it is hard. We cannot let domestic issues within the church, however pressing they may seem, distract us. We cannot allow the lazy universalism that has taken hold of so many parts of our church infect us. We must go on calling people back to life in Jesus. We must speak the words of life that alone can set souls free.

Sharing this good news is not an optional extra. It is not for the gifted few or the priests or those who are into that kind of thing. It is impossible to honour Mary without sharing with the world the life of her Son. To make devotion to God’s mother a private discipline is utter hypocrisy. If your love for Mary is authentic, it can only explode outwards in proclamation of her child. As we place Mary here, we challenge a nation to do what her child tells us.

So what have we just done? Today, as we place Mary in this great Abbey church, we claim this great nation for Jesus Christ. Today we claim this nation for Christ.

Never forget the prophetic power of what you have done today. Let this day change your life and fill your heart with power from on high. Starting in your own homes and in your churches, go and build a nation that is holy to God. Build a nation that loves justice. Build a nation that does whatever He tells us.

For today we have placed Mary back at our nation’s heart. And Mary has pointed us to her son. And for him, for Jesus, we claim this nation today. Amen.

**+Philip Burnley**

*May 4th 2019*