

WITNESSING TO A REDEEMED HUMANITY

I live in Portsmouth - in the Deep South! - and one thing I occasionally like doing with visitors is taking them up the Spinnaker Tower. The Spinnaker Tower, in the revamped harbour, is a tourist attraction. It's 170 metres high. It has an express lift that whisks you to the observation deck in a few seconds. Once you get out - after your stomach has settled down - you get an amazing view. You can see over to Southampton one way, Chichester the other, with great views of the city and across to the Isle of Wight. It's exhilarating! There's something about heights that gives you a sense of ecstasy - not the drug! - I mean *ek-stasis*, standing out. Like being on a high mountain or by the seaside, looking at a panorama, you can soon find yourself asking existential questions about your life and your future: Where am I? Where am I going? Am I happy? In the Bible, heights and mountains are often associated with God's presence. They are holy. They are places where you can meet God.

I'm pleased we are making this pilgrimage today, the feast of the Lord's Transfiguration. For today, the Liturgy takes us up a high mountain to be with Jesus. Just as we heard in the Gospel, *Jesus took with him Peter, John and James and went up the mountain to pray*. There on Mount Tabor, He was transfigured. *The aspect of His face was changed and His clothing became as brilliant as lightning*. St Leo teaches us that by His Transfiguration, Jesus sought to strengthen the apostles' faith. He revealed to them His inner identity as God the Son. It was a revelation in which the Holy Spirit descended as a cloud and God the Father spoke: *This is my Son, the Chosen One, listen to Him*. No wonder St Peter exclaimed: *Master it is wonderful for us to be here*.

Today, those are surely our words too: *It's wonderful for us to be here*. It is wonderful for us to be here in Walsingham, England's Nazareth. It's wonderful for us to be here with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, who brings us close to Her Son. We are here on a pilgrimage. We've come from far and wide across the land. We've left our homes, our work, our usual routines in order to come away to be with Jesus. We've come to be with Jesus on a pilgrimage of prayer and reparation for the sanctity of life. As a bishop, on behalf of the Church in our land, I want to thank you for this. I want to thank you for making this pilgrimage. I want to thank you for the powerful pro-life witness you give, each in your own way, upholding the dignity of life from conception to natural death.

I would say we have three special intentions in our prayer today.

First, we're here to thank God for life, for the gift of life, for the mystery of life itself, yours and mine. God loves this world He has created, this blue planet, the third from the sun, orbiting through space at 18 miles a second. He loves Nature and the world of plants and animals He has created. Above all, He loves every human being, made in His image. Humans are the pinnacle of creation; they lie at the crossroads between the visible and the invisible, with bodies from the earth and souls from above. So first, let us thank God today for life.

Secondly, let's pray in reparation for the sins against life that we and our brothers and sisters commit. Think of the damage we do to the natural world. Think of the damage we do to one another through war, violence, injustice, and stockpiling nuclear weapons. Think of the abomination of abortion - now at record levels - millions of children murdered in the

womb. Think too of those who now wish to help the elderly commit suicide or to euthanize the sick. These are grave sins, grave offences, grave crimes against the Lord and the way of life he intended for this world. So today, let us make reparation and penance for all our sins.

And thirdly, we come to Walsingham to pray for new heart. The other night I was watching on TV a debate between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak, about who would be the next Prime Minister. The interviewer kept the debate going – squirting petrol onto it every so often – all about the economy, fuel prices, tax cuts, water shortages. Yet there was nothing about life, family, morality, or spirituality! There's a real vacuum here that makes everything else seem so superficial. This is why we need to pray and act. As Catholics, as people pro-life, we have a real opportunity. Yes, I know the pro-life cause has often suffered set-backs. It's often as if we are running upstream. I know our Gospel message is counter-cultural, with the media against us. I know we have a Supreme Court that time and again judges in favour of death, of withdrawing food and hydration, of preserving the NHS over the life of an individual. Yet look at Roe v Wade! Look at those now favouring lower limits on abortion! Look at those now wanting a more eco-friendly life-style, those working for peace, those helping the needy. It's not the Message we proclaim that is wrong. Christ is the Truth; and His Holy Spirit is at work in countless hearts. It's about making sure the Message comes over clearly and attractively. That's why today – as we thank God for life, as we make reparation for our sins – we also pray for new heart, for new strength, for a new creativity in communicating attractively the Gospel of life.

*This is my son, the chosen one; listen to Him.* The Transfiguration speaks volumes to today's secular society. For in that meeting high up on Tabor, Jesus not only revealed His Divinity; He gave us a glimpse of His future humanity, risen and glorified. He gives us a glimpse of what human life should be. He shows us a true anthropology, an authentic vision of the human person, created, fallen but redeemed. He revealed the life of heaven, the glory of what you and I are called to be, the joy of the new creation. This is our goal, and also our ambition. It's the Good News, we seek to proclaim, in season and out, whether people accept it or not.

*This is my son, the chosen one; listen to Him.* So today, as we undertake this pilgrimage of prayer and reparation for the sanctity of life, let us come through Mary to Jesus in order to draw from His heart, hope, strength, new vigour. In this Mass, in which Jesus lays down His life for us, let's open our Hearts to receive Him in welcome. Let's ask Him to pour out His Holy Spirit across the land that many more people may find their way to communion with Him in His Church. *It is wonderful for us to be here.* May He grant us new heart, new hope, new faith that one day we may come to His Holy Mountain and be found worthy to be with Him forever in heaven.