

Pro Life Pilgrimage to Walsingham August 2023

It is entirely appropriate that we should gather here In Walsingham for this Mass in reparation for the loss of life of the unborn. Walsingham is the national shrine of Our Lady - Our Lady who brought Life into the world - and it is to her that we may look for wisdom and guidance as we ponder both the gift and the mystery of life. Especially, we may reflect on the story of the Annunciation in which Mary is told that she is to be the mother of the Saviour of the world. She is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her and that the power of the Most High will cover her with its shadow.

And - coming to the theme of this year's pilgrimage - she accepts this gift- and she also accepts all that is involved in receiving this gift. She accepts **all that is asked of her** and here, I suggest, we already find a message for the times in which we live - a message about attitudes, about patience, about adjusting to a new situation ,about learning to see things in new ways, about not seeing things simply from ones own perspective, and one's own circumstances. You might even say that the story of the Annunciation tells you everything you need to know about being a Christian. A Christian is open to a bigger picture, a more profound story which is not all about me -also it's a story whose message is for everyone. It is not a story of panic. It is a story of freedom and of faith.

And that brings us to the second part of Mary's story - the sequel. Having received the message and the call of God, she is also told that her cousin Elizabeth - an older woman - is herself with child for the first time. So when the angel leaves her, she doesn't dwell on her own situation, she doesn't stress about herself, she goes to the assistance of her cousin and stays with her for three months. The word for that is **service**.

So if the annunciation tells us all we need to know about **becoming** a Christian, the Visitation tells us everything we need to know about **being** a Christian. Mary receives the gift of life and explores the nature of that life in service to her cousin. The opposite of service is preoccupation with ones own situation and the worst form that can take is is a spirit of resentment - anger

at one's own situation and jealousy of those who seem to have fared better. When we let go of the bonds of resentment and instead go out in service, then we are free. Service and freedom go hand in hand.

So openness, receptivity and service - all evidence of purity of heart and of accepting the gift. Accepting the gift means accepting the call and the challenges that may present themselves - perhaps being open to a change of direction in one's own life - a new challenge - a change of story.

We may also consider the eucharist itself, which we are celebrating here in Walsingham today so as to understand about "accepting the gift." One special moment in the Mass comes before Communion when we are invited to offer one another a sign of peace. We are therefore also called to accept the peace from whoever offers it to us. We are to receive the **gift** of peace and help others to receive it. As members of the Body of Christ we recognise one another as members of the same body and we express our communion with one another in the sign of peace. We turn to whoever is near us. Not just our friends. We are open to everyone who shares the gift of life - everyone who is part of the Body - everyone who has been conceived, been born, and who continues to belong within the Body of Christ. It's about acceptance and inclusion so that none feels isolated and so that no-one who is expecting a child will ever feel alone.

We are all connected and Pope Francis uses the word "fraternity" to express our belonging within the Body. Everyone is created to become a member of the Body of Christ and for that reason absolutely merits protection, love and commitment.. Everyone who has ever been born was conceived to become a child of God, born for grace and for glory - for growth within the Body. So each person's story is precious and each one has a unique contribution to make to the life of the Body.

St John Henry Newman said that each of us is a link in a chain. Each of us has a unique role within God's providence and within the life of the Body. The Christian virtue that underpins all this is the virtue of gratitude. The ability to be grateful for the other, for what we receive through the other is vital, no

matter what the circumstances and difficulties there may be. There is a bigger picture - bigger than our fears and our convenience.

Today we have a rather gruesome gospel: the beheading of John the Baptist. He incurred King Herod's wrath because he said things that King Herod did not want to hear. Herod had broken the Jewish laws on marriage. John had denounced him, so John's voice had to be silenced. The daughter of Herod's new wife was Salome and Herod offered to give her anything she wished if she agreed to dance for him. She did dance for him and as her reward she demanded the head of John the Baptist on a plate because John was effectively accusing her mother of adultery. And she had her wish.

The point I want to make today was that for Herod and his wife, John the Baptist was a nuisance, a problem - and the only way to get rid of this problem was to eliminate him. I do think that awful story has things to teach us today. Things about how we react to criticism and how we may try to silence people. I also think it has a particular resonance for our pilgrimage today.

In the news in recent times there have been some terrible stories of couples neglecting, abusing and causing the death of an innocent child. Stories like that are particularly shocking and one wonders how anyone could ever do that. How could anyone treat a helpless child in that way?

What is significant for this occasion today is that that shock and outrage does not figure in the reporting or the public response to taking the life of the unborn - which is an act of violence.

Another event was when someone was prosecuted for aborting her child after that time when it is currently legal to do so. What was interesting and very disturbing was that some people reacted to this case by saying that when it comes to the life of the unborn there should not be any legal sanctions at all against a mother in relation to how she treats the child in her womb. The actions of the mother should not come under the law at all. That is a very dangerous principle.

Let me mention another anomaly. There was a piece in the Today programme a few weeks ago about the lack of care and concern for women who have miscarriages. The woman who was saying this also insisted that we should not talk about miscarriage - rather we should talk about baby loss, because that is how it feels for the mother. Now surely if that is baby loss so also is legal termination. Otherwise you are saying that the value of the unborn child can be determined by the views and the feelings of the mother.

Finally I want to return to the point that all of this is a failure to understand connection and fraternity - two of the great themes of Pope Francis. It also a failure of faith - failure to see a bigger picture beyond one's own fears and one's own convenience. The unborn child is in a process of **becoming** as is the toddler and the teenager.

Pope Francis has talked a lot about concern for the environment and there is of course a connection between our concern to preserve the unborn and our concern to preserve the environment. In both cases we are talking about gift, and about supporting and nurturing the gift of life in the natural world. It's all of a piece. The pro life movement and the environmental movement are intimately and intrinsically connected. We must not get to the point where the cosmos can no longer sustain life but by the same token, we must also ensure that we sustain all human life at every stage of its growth from conception onwards so that our children may inherit the earth.