

# From generation to generation

## The Rt Revd John Broadhurst

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*Words from the Magnificat, "from generation to generation".*

If you remember, about ten years ago, there was a lot of controversy in the Church of England and I found myself in the midst of it. My mother, one day, said to my brother, "I blame myself". And my brother said, "Why on Earth do you blame yourself?" And she said, "Because I taught him as a boy to always stand up for what he believes in".

Now interestingly, if you said to me, "You're like your mother", I would actually be insulted, and I think if you said to mother, she was like me, she'd be even more insulted. My mother's still alive, quite elderly now.

But there is sense in which, "Know the child, know the parent", is true and vice-versa. We encounter people we don't even know in people we meet. I've also been fascinated by the role of Our Lady in the scheme of salvation. And if I go through pious language, I can talk about the Second Eve. I want you to think for a little while about what it is to be human and the society in which we live. If you think about what it is to be human, I think then we'd better understand devotion to Our Lady and, indeed, the whole role of the saints.

The modern view of man, or perhaps I should say (to be politically correct) person, is that we human beings are individuals here for a brief period and we'd better get what we can out of it because it doesn't last that long. We live in a society where we actually believe "every man is an island". We have no sense in our society, in the west, of family or community. People are insular and people are looking for what they can get out of life. And therefore it's the accumulation of wealth, it's the seeking of pleasure, it's drugs, it's sex, it's all those things, food, all those things which, in one sense, are transitory. We live in a world which no longer values community or society.

That view is not the biblical concept of life: male and female, He created them both. We human beings are social animals. We human beings are designed and created to live in community. We human beings are created in community. We human beings are nourished and fed in community, educated in community and live and grow in community. And yet our society emphasises the opposite.

There are great dangers for human beings in seeking to lead insular lives. Our blessed Lord is born into a family and it's not simply the Holy Family; Mary, Joseph and Our Lord. There's the extended family; the kinsmen, Elizabeth, there's a family—people around, people who play their

part in the nourishing of the child, Jesus; people who actually support the family.

Manifestly in Christian devotion, Our Lady sits at the centre. She plays a crucial part.

If you look at devotion to Our Lady, you then find very conflicting images. I can think of very virginal statues; innocent, pure. I can think in Brittany of statues that are extremely fecund, are about nourishment, breasts overflowing with milk, an entirely different image. Why? Because the question of motherhood touches many different aspects of life, many different aspects of what we are and what we're about.

Various different aspects of life are touched in the person and in the image of Mary. There was a great devotion, particularly in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, to the *Pieta*—Mary mourning death, Mary in sorrow, Mary carrying the body, Mary nourishing the body of her Son.

Now you only have to be a parish priest for a few years to know that one of the greatest tragedies in life is when parents lose their children – death out of sorts. And it touches us.

There seems, to me, to be a danger and a joy in devotion to Our Lady. The danger, the corruption of that devotion, is that she is taken out of context, out of the communal relationship of the family and essentially the relationship with her blessed son, and becomes a person in her own right. In other words, a kind of religious version of the modern misunderstanding about life. She can only properly be seen in context. And in context, she is the First Chosen. She is the predestined one. She is the one called to bear the Messiah; the most privileged and most blessed of all women and men; the person chosen by God. And in her, we should encounter those various things that resonate with what we are as human beings; the very things that put life into context.

I always get concerned when religious devotion sometimes seems to take life out of context, when piety no longer relates to reality. We should, in her, meet birth, death, life, nourishment, caring, God's call, obedience, joy. We should meet in her those things that are real to our lives. Our devotion to Our Lady should not be focused on one particular aspect.

There are various things that are real for us and that devotion changes sometimes through the centuries. I've often been amused by a fact which struck me years ago that shrines like Walsingham and Loreto—holy houses, England's Nazareth—come from the period immediately following the end of the Crusades, the period when the real Nazareth was no longer available for English pilgrims. In other words, Our Lady encounters us where we are in our needs and that need is a need for place; a need to be reminded that what we are is rooted in a real world.

I started with those words from the Magnificat, "From generation to generation". And what that is saying to me is that the gospel has to be rooted in the reality of what it truly is to be human: a person living in a context which is social. And if you think of your devotion a bit further, Our Lady lives in a context that is social.

“The angels and the saints gathered around the throne of the almighty”. The angels and the saints – a great community. And that’s what we’re called to be, a community; people who know what it is to be human, who know what it is to be redeemed and who know what it is to hope for life beyond the grave.

Our Lady is the First Chosen, the First Fruit, the Second Eve. She understands us and she prays for us. She is an exemplar for us and she is relevant to us at every single point of our lives. May we be blessed in our devotion to her.

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