

# **Walsingham – The Holy House**

## **The Rt Revd Robert Ladds**

THE heart of every Pilgrimage to Walsingham is the Holy House. For those of us who love Our Lady and are devoted to Walsingham, that Holy House calls us back again and again. Our visit to the Holy House might be for a formal act of worship, or for Mass, or intercessory prayer, but we will also feel compelled to make the personal and quiet visit too; perhaps just kneeling before the venerated Image of Our Lady of Walsingham, or sitting quietly in thought for a few precious moments.

I have often felt that this special call of the Holy House is linked with the fact that it represents a home – the Home of the Holy Family at Nazareth – and we can all understand what a home is, respond to a sense of home, because we have experienced life within a home as part of our everyday human experience.

Some years ago, I had the privilege of visiting and of saying Mass in the Holy House of Loreto in Italy. And what a special and powerful experience that was to be!

There are, of course, the various legends associated with the Holy House of Loreto, its origin and its arrival at the present site in Italy. That Holy House is taken to be part of the actual building in which the Holy Family of Jesus, Mary and Joseph dwelt at Nazareth. The power and presence of the Holy House at Loreto is formidable and the Holy House at Walsingham, built as dictated by our Lady to Richaldis and reconstructed at the Restoration of the Shrine, models very closely in type and dimension that of the Holy House of Nazareth at Loreto.

When, in the Gospel, we hear that the Holy Angel announced God's intentions in salvation to Mary, because of the Holy House we can picture this amazing and profound event taking place in a real place, a house, a home. When we read of the Visit of the Magi in adoration of the Christ Child and read "when they came into the house ..." we can, again, because of our experience of the Holy House, picture what took place because we can imagine that house and home. When we read in Scripture of the Finding of the Boy Jesus in the Temple, we can

identify with the power and drama of the event and with the relief in the hearts of the Parents, when we read of Jesus “returning home with them to Nazareth and continued to be under their authority”.

Thus it is, that the Holy House of Our Lady of Walsingham gives us a tangible, as well as spiritual, link with Mary and our Blessed Lord. The Holy House assists us in understanding and in making real that essential Truth of the Catholic Faith. That Catholic Truth, that God in Christ became Man, became one with us and dwelt with us. The technical and theological concept of the Incarnation is one thing, but I want to suggest there are other dimensions to knowing, deep within us, of the truth of God’s love in Salvation. We can experience it – know it – live it!

Recent archaeological research has increased both our understanding of Bronze Age and Early Iron Age society and has also given an insight into an aspect of our human psychology and spiritual characteristics. There would appear to be a deep and fundamental relationship between our sense of the holy and that of home. The first permanent homes created, as our ancestors ceased a nomadic way of life, have been shown to be a complex and subtle combination of a physical place of refuge and a spiritual focus for worship and expression of the holy. The place where we live, find relationship, solace, security and comfort, would seem deeply and fundamentally related in us to our sense of the Holy, our Faith and the place and practice of our religion. There would, indeed, seem to be a fundamental truth contained in the adage: “Home is where the heart is”.

But it is just this reality of the Christian Faith that makes it all the more challenging to us who believe. The truth and reality of the Faith demands something of us – asks for a deep and personal response – a response of Faith and a response of love.

In the Gospel narrative, that which we call the Annunciation, we learn of the Angel greeting Mary. We echo the words of the Angel when we say the Angelus: “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee”. Grace is the word we use to speak of the free and eternal love and favour of God, which is the spring and the source of all the gifts which we receive from Him. Grace is God’s free gift to us.

The Angel tells Our Lady that She is “the most favoured One”; that She is “full of Grace”. But what can this mean to Mary when She is confronted by the message that God has chosen Her to be the Mother of God; to conceive and give birth to the Messiah; God to be made man of Her flesh; Her child to be the Saviour of the World? As it is impossible for us to begin to imagine what all this might mean, just so would it have been impossible for Our Lady to take in such a calling from God.

Yet Mary’s response to God’s call is one of trust and of faith. She does not question or try to excuse Herself from the calling. Her response is to say “Yes” to the impossible and the unknown task which She is asked to undertake. Her response to God is based on Faith and Trust in Him alone.

It is only when she has consented – said “Yes” willingly and without condition – that this Gift of Grace is released and becomes fact. She is given the Grace to conceive and give birth to Jesus Christ.

But even then, the challenge to Our Blessed Lady goes on. The making of a home for the Christ Child. What did that visit to Her Nazareth Home of those august and exotic Magi with their potent and symbolic Gifts mean? Then the Finding in the Temple – the worry, the fear of a lost child, and exactly what did Her Divine Son mean about being “in His Father’s House”?

The clue to Mary’s constant response is there, in the Scripture: “She pondered all this and treasured it up in her heart”. The trust and faith of Mary that said “Yes” to God’s call and released sufficient Grace for the task, continued to be given at each step of the way She was called to take, because She continued to walk in that same way of Trust and Faith. Her personal and spiritual stability is rooted in Faith in God and a fundamental aspect of Her rootedness is in the Nazareth House and Home of the Holy Family.

Just as the Home of the Holy Family at Nazareth was a source of comfort and understanding to Our Lady and to Christ Jesus Himself, so The Holy House of our Lady of Walsingham is a source of comfort and understanding to us. But it is also a reminder to us of the reality of the Incarnation and of the implications of such a mighty truth to those who believe.

Because our Faith is real; because we have a real God who has lived on earth as one of us; because by His Death He has incorporated us into His eternal life; because by His Resurrection from the dead He lives for evermore and lives in us; because of all this, we are called with Mary to respond to God's prompting and calling in complete trust and love

Yes, of course, this will be a constant and great challenge; it will be demanding upon us; yes, it will involve risk and uncertainty; it will take us into dark and unknown ways as well as in pleasant places.

Much like the social and practical challenge of a child or young person leaving home for the first time. A child equipped and given confidence by the practical and spiritual experience of all that a house and home can be, stands in good stead as he faces the future.

We who know the peace, comfort and spiritual depth of the Holy House can also know, with Our Blessed Lady, whose Nazareth Home that House is, that the Grace of God will be sufficient.

Sufficient in all things.