

Homily: Incarnation and Atonement

Bishop Lindsay Urwin

It is a privilege for me as Administrator of the Shrine to welcome you as you begin this consecrated time together. And a special welcome to any of you who have not been to Walsingham before. For us, many people have experienced Walsingham as soft ground; it seems to me that our culture is often experienced as stony ground, that experience of the Lord. But here in Walsingham in the Shrine there is a sense of consecrated space. We struggle and seek to live as if God is true and that has its impact on those who come here.

And for us, particularly in the Anglican tradition, the Holy House of which there is a replica here is absolutely central to our understanding of the pilgrimage. It was given to Fr Hope Patten in the 1920s to restore pilgrimage after the destruction of the Reformation, and having first of all, of course, had an image of Our Lady of Walsingham constructed and put in the Parish Church. Then in 1931 there were great processions to bring the image here to a newly-constructed Holy House. It seems to me in the history of pilgrimage it was that which was the turning point in the life of pilgrimage to Walsingham, and the real restoration to what had been before, because however much the history of Walsingham is shrouded in mystery, we do know that the first – the first – aim of pilgrimage from the beginning was to come to the Holy House before there was an image.

This little bit of space where we could connect with the great moment of transformation known as the Conception, when the Word became flesh – and we have a lot for which to thank the very low-church Bishop of Norwich, who was bishop at the time of Fr Hope Patten and was rather suspicious, as some Anglicans still are. People are often surprised when they come to Walsingham none more so than some Anglicans who find their way into this building and are surprised, sometimes by joy, sometimes by confusion at what they find here. The low-church Bishop of Norwich asked Fr Hope Patten if he would think about removing the statue from the church and perhaps replacing it with a picture. I have never quite understood what the real difference is between a statue and a picture. As a bishop myself I learnt that sometimes priests tell you half the truth. Fr Hope Patten gave the impression that he would be obedient to the Bishop. What he did not tell him

was that he had secured a piece of private land and constructed the Holy House and in the Holy House he would find the image, which is the sort of reminder, although just in carved wood, of the great doctrine of the Incarnation, which is the non-negotiable doctrine – apart from that we cease to be Christian, it seems to me. But although we can say “How can this be?” we must not question its reality.

So it is a reminder to us of the Incarnation and, of course, a Holy House without an altar would be incomplete for it takes us to the purpose of his coming.

So for us here the twin doctrines of Incarnation and Atonement are central and it is our desire that people experience them as living signs of God’s longing. So however long you have been a Christian, it is our hope that just in these days here you will discover afresh, if only in a small way, God’s personal love for you, and also perhaps rekindle your longing for the unity of the church which is his will.

Let me read a little reflection written by one of the founders of the religious order to which I belong, The Oratory of the Good Shepherd, a man called Eric Milner-White:

Hail Mary, full of grace. Thou hast found favour with God. Let us with the great angels salute in gratitude and joy our sister and mother in Jesus. Blest be she among women, whose womb bore God’s son. Blest by God’s grace be with all, that he should make his Body of hers. Blest be she who obeyed. I am the bondmaid of the Lord. As he had said, so be it, and blest all who do his will humbly, joyfully as she. No sooner had she spoken it than the overshadowing of the Holy Ghost formed Christ within her. By thy same Holy Spirit, O God, conceive in us thy whole will, thine own life. O power of the Most High who for our sake came upon Mary, come upon us.

So as you begin this time of conference and pilgrimage, let us pray for the grace to set aside those things that have been left undone in order to be here, entrusting them into God’s care; people that we love and who have a need of us, situations that require our counsel, let us entrust them to him; even those who may be disappointed because our minds are not on them but are focussed even on the Lord, that he may give them consolation. Let us pray that the Holy Spirit may unite and bind you together as one community in him as you turn your hearts to worship, your minds to think upon him, your will to be strengthened.