



Joint Pilgrimage to Ladyewell

Saturday 2nd June 2012

Things are not always what they seem

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It is a happy co-incidence that we are making our pilgrimage to Ladyewell, honouring our heavenly queen, on this Jubilee weekend when we are giving thanks for 60 years of service of our earthly queen. It is even more appropriate that our principal celebrant should be the Bishop of Richborough, sometime Vicar of Walsingham and former chaplain to Her Majesty the Queen. Not only that, but for several years Fr Norman (as he then was) lived in Clarence House. I refer, of course, not to that house off the Mall where the Queen Mother used to live, but to premises in Shieldfield near Newcastle city centre. Things are not always what they seem. For as curate of Christ Church Shieldfield, Newcastle City Council gave him a flat in a block by the name of Clarence House.

Things are not always what they seem. To the ill-informed our celebrations today might seem to be about worshipping the Blessed Virgin Mary. But we know, or at least I sincerely hope we know, that we are simply honouring Mary and asking for her intercession, as we worship Almighty God. But things are not always what they seem and we must take time to explain to those who are new to the glories of Catholicism what we are about. It is too easy to assume that everyone knows and understands what we take for granted. People may draw erroneous conclusions about what we do and believe, and either reject all that we stand for or worse, take up some heretical parody of them. Things are not always what they seem.

And things are not always what they seem in the dear old Church of England! Only a few weeks ago we thought that we were building up to the culmination of the years of debate about women bishops and that we would know our fate in July. But now there is a distinct possibility that there will be an attempt to get that debate adjourned so that the House of Bishops can reconsider their amendments, and that the final vote will not be until November or even later. So we face some uncertainty. And we face uncertainty as to our future leaders. In addition to the appointment of a new Archbishop of Canterbury, we need new bishops of Beverley, Whitby and Blackburn. As we face yet more uncertainty perhaps we should look to Our Lady for guidance as to how to handle that uncertainty.

We must start with the incarnation. In the beginning was the Word and the Word was made flesh. The Divine became human. And how? Through the Blessed Virgin Mary who bore the Divine. She was obedient to the message of an angel. She simply said yes to God's plan – despite all her doubts and questionings. Things were not as they first seemed to her. She was frightened by the visit of the angel Gabriel. She wondered what sort of greeting this was. And when he gave her that amazing news she was full of doubts and questionings. How can this be? Not for her was there any question of arguing about her right to fulfilment by going out to work and expecting the state to look after her offspring. Not for her was there any question of saying that equality and justice demanded that it should be a daughter that should be the Word made flesh, rather than a Son. She simply said to the angel 'Let what you have said be done to me'. She said yes. She was obedient to the will of God.

The point is that the initiative was taken by God and Mary responded by saying yes. In doing this she allowed the Holy Spirit to act upon her so that the incarnation took place, so that Jesus could be born. Mary bore Christ so that he could be brought into the world. In the same way, God must take the initiative in the Church. The Church must allow the Holy Spirit to act upon it so that Christ can be born into the world of today. For the Church has the duty of bringing Christhood into the world.

There is always a danger that parts of the Church become groups of people holding to some particular purpose or purposes. However good those purposes may be, the Church must be more than a club with some good purpose. That is a particular danger for those of us engaged in and concerned by the present political debates and uncertainties in the Church. Despite all those distractions the Church, like Mary, must allow the Holy Spirit to operate upon it and within it. Like Mary the Church must co-operate with God through his Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of the earthly life of Christ, Mary had an important part to play and at the end of his earthly life Mary had an important part to play. She (with John) remained with Christ at the cross – she was faithful when most of the disciples had fled. Like Mary the Church must be faithful and not take the easy route of running away. We in the church must remember the example of Mary and not run away with the world, but remain faithful to the truth.

So, when we are discussing all the difficult issues which confront the Church and society today we must always be sure that we are remaining faithful to Christ and are not running away from him with the crowd, leaving just Our Blessed Lady and John to remain with him. We too must be faithful. We must not do the easy and popular thing and run with the crowd. So we must be prepared to speak out on the traditional doctrine of marriage. Have you signed the coalition for marriage petition? If not, why not? Is it because you don't want to get involved in that sort of thing? Might someone see your name and be shocked? Is that being faithful to Christ as Mary was faithful to him?

But being faithful must not mean that we become so intransigent that we are unable even to engage with people with whom we have differences. Things are not always what they seem! If you see me at dinner with a prominent liberal member of General Synod it does not mean that I have become a liberal. I used to be a liberal when Bishop Norman allowed me to deacon a mass at his Church in Newcastle, but the Holy Spirit, and a lot of reading and talking and praying changed

me. If we want people to understand and believe that we wish to stay in the Church of England we have got to talk to them and explain our position. We cannot do that if we run away from people with whom we disagree.

Mary was more than just faithful at the end of her Son's life. She not only remained with Jesus as he hung on the cross. She suffered with him. Of course she suffered as any human being would suffer at seeing a man die the terrible death on a cross. Of course she suffered all the more because Jesus was her son and so she suffered with all the additional pain and anguish that a mother would have in seeing her son in such agony. But more than that, Mary joined in the suffering of Christ on the cross. For she, Blessed among all women, was in such perfect unity and conformity with Christ, that she was able to join in and share with him in his self-emptying on the cross. She joined in the suffering of Christ on the cross.

Again she is the pattern for the Church. The Church must be in such perfect unity and conformity with Christ that it can join in with his suffering. As Christ gave himself up on the cross so must the Church give itself up so that it can be reborn and transfigured into the kingdom of God. And yet how many congregations do we know where the idea of self-giving, of giving themselves up is entirely alien? For too many congregations the Church exists not to be re-born and to be transfigured as the kingdom of God, but rather to stay as it was and is and ever more shall be so - in its imperfect state. Or, if there is to be change, it a change by dumbing down to the lowest common denominator and changing worship into entertainment. The idea of suffering and self-giving is alien to many of us. But self-giving and suffering is there in the life and witness of Mary as it is, of course, in her Son

So we have in our Lady, Mother of the Church, the pattern for the Church – obedience, faithfulness, and suffering. Should we not be trying to encourage our brothers and sisters in our congregations at home who don't 'get' Mary, those for whom Mary is a strange extra that some of us like, that she has something to say to us? Not by

saying that everyone must recite the rosary or that everyone must go on pilgrimage to Ladyewell or Walsingham, but by gently explaining to them the relevance of Mary to their lives and the life of the Church. Should we not be trying to talk to those in neighbouring parishes about our vision for the Church, shaped by the example of Mary and her obedience, faithfulness and suffering? Could we not stand up at a deanery synod when they are talking about a vision and a plan for the future that we crave a Church shaped on the pattern of Mary – obedience, faithfulness and suffering?

Things are not always what they seem. When a young girl was told she was to be the mother of Our Lord it all seemed impossible. When her betrothed found out she was pregnant he was minded to divorce her. He had come to the conclusion which the ways of the world suggested. It seemed to him that Mary had been unfaithful. It took an angel to put him right, to make him realise that he as a man could not understand everything and things might not be as they seemed. It was the Holy Spirit at work in Mary and he must support her.

We do not know what is happening in the Church at the moment, but things might not be as they seem. They might be better, they might be worse. But if we follow the example of Mary, if we are an obedient Church, if we are faithful Church and if we are a suffering Church, we will be able to withstand the uncertainty for however long it lasts.