

NATIONAL PILGRIMAGE 2018
28th May 2018. 2.30pm
Sermon by The Revd Preb. Graeme Rowlands

'Mary, do not be afraid' (S. Luke 1.30)

If you look carefully amongst the chaos of my study you will find a little booklet written by my predecessor but one, Fr Hillier, and published by the London Committee for Walsingham in 1943 - it cost 6d. It's called 'Constructing a Decoration?' Inside there is a fine line drawing of Our Lady of Walsingham wearing her original mantle and crown and held in a large pair of hands which are presumably not the hands of Fr Hope Patten but of God. And basically the book tells us that devotion to Our Lady, as offered at this Shrine, is not an optional extra for those who like that sort of thing but an essential part of the practice of our faith. He writes 'True devotion to Our Lady is not like artificial flowers stuck on to make religion look pretty: it is a natural, authentic and luxuriant blossoming that draws its life from the very roots of Christianity, from the Incarnation'. This is a Shrine of the fact that God became man; Mary invites us into her house to reflect on what that means for us, to carry that truth away with us, to live by it. If we get that right, we shall have discovered a firm ground for our hope which no one can take from us.

That is a faith which we receive from the Universal Church. This Shrine was re-established on the basis that we are part of the Catholic Church throughout the world, sharing the same faith and administering the same sacraments. The foundation stone in the Holy House tells us that it was restored in the Pontificate of Pius XI, Hope Patten being Parish Priest of Walsingham. (It did include the name of the Bishop of Norwich, but he asked for it to be removed. How good it is to see that the concrete has been chipped away and it is now restored). We have moved on since then and, through ARCIC, come to agree that there should be a Universal Primate for a united Church and that Primate is the successor of S. Peter. The level of cooperation between the two shrines here is wonderful to see, the mutual support in ministry and witness which will be secured by an Ecumenical Covenant, to be published later this year. But this is a vision which much of the Church in England has lost through further division, fears about validity, lack of confidence as we minister to a world which struggles to understand why we exist at all. We can help the Church to recover that hope, to work towards that unity which is essential for our witness. Our Lord prays: 'May they be so completely one, that the world will realise that it was you who sent me'.

But this will only happen if we can also restore that pattern of priestly service and care, that understanding of the sacraments which are the basis by which we live; this is now so often forgotten within the Church of England p.l.c. I have never been a great one for going to meetings and conferences of clergy but on those occasions I am forced to go all the talk is about leadership, strategic planning, fresh expressions of being church. There is absolutely nothing about priesthood, about service, about love and care for our people, about the life we need and receive from the sacraments. Those who come on pilgrimage here, priests and people, those who faithfully minister here day by day, have an inestimable treasure by which to teach the Church again what we should actually be doing. That is the level of sacrifice which God asks of us. It is no accident that the substitute for sacrificing Isaac is a ram caught by its horns in a thorn bush: we have offered that Lamb on this altar this morning.

A faith immersed in the Incarnation, a vision of what the Church should be, an understanding of priesthood and sacraments, these are the treasures given to us here by Mary, Our Star of Hope, our Mother, our Queen. I shall let Fr Hillier speak the last words to you: 'It is for us, in our home of the Incarnation, to resist the rising tide of heresy which threatens to engulf the Faith, or what is left of it, in this country, to raise once again the triumph song of the Council of Ephesus - Mary is the Mother of God. We must make our voices heard in defence not of a pretty piece of decoration, but of the solid rock of the Godhead of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ'.