

2020 0924 Havant Commemoration of OLW

Today the Church commemorates Our Lady of Walsingham, so this is a special day for all members of our parish cell of Our Lady of Faith; but not only for them, because Walsingham and its message are for everyone.

Although the origins of the image and the shrine are lost in the mists of time and legend, Walsingham's title, "England's Nazareth", should set us thinking. There is only one Nazareth, of course, where Mary received the angel's message that she would be the mother of God's messiah and where Jesus grew up, receiving his early experiences and where he was formed for adult life.

That may be enough reason for us to have a special affection for that little Galilean village whose well, synagogue and carpenter's shop have left such a mark on human history. But it has never been enough for Christians to remember holy places from afar. We need to know what difference they make to us now. Indeed we might think of Pope Gregory's advice to St Augustine of Canterbury at the very foundation of the Church of England, "*Do not honour things because of the places they come from, but honour places because of the good things that come from them.*"

Nazareth matters because that's where Jesus came from, so it is a small step for Nazareth to be a kind of symbol of wherever Jesus is present. Many Christians all through the ages have found a pilgrimage to Nazareth a powerful way of joining their own sense of Jesus NOW with the story of Jesus THEN. But of course for most people travelling to Nazareth has always been an impossible dream. It is hardly surprising then that they have sought more local ways of celebrating what God did there and then in order to rekindle their faith here and now.

So that is the point of Walsingham. It's why the Shrine was established in the first place and it is why for so many centuries people have travelled there in faith, hope and love. It may be a long way from Havant, but we can get there even if the journey may require some effort. But now,

especially this year, when the Shrine is closed and pilgrimage impossible, we are forced to ask what Nazareth means for us - not in Galilee or even in north Norfolk, but here, in Havant, in our homes and in our own lives.

Pilgrimage is not religious tourism; it is ultimately a journey inwards, a journey to discover the presence of Jesus Christ. In a wonderful passage in his *Confessions* St Augustine of Hippo wrote, *“You were within me, and I outside; and I looked for you outside and I rushed towards the lovely things you made. You were with me but I was not with you.”*

Just think about that for moment. God, the creator of heaven and earth, the infinite, the unbounded, than whom nothing greater can exist or even be imagined, is pleased to make his home in that tiny, very particular bit of creation that is my own heart.

There is a wonderful traditional image of Mary showing her with Jesus in her breast: the title of the image is “She who contains the uncontainable.” “Containing the uncontainable” is not only a privilege of Mary: it is something to which we are all called.

Nazareth and Walsingham, wonderful and evocative places as they are, exist to remind us of the supreme truth that in Jesus, born of Mary, we meet Emmanuel - God with us, not just in Nazareth and Walsingham but always and everywhere. God did indeed make himself at home in Mary’s womb, but he makes himself at home in each one of us. Remember that every day. When you receive holy communion, and those of you participating in this Eucharist online in making an act of spiritual communion, know that you are the tabernacle of God himself, and consider what honour and reverence you owe to his presence.