

## **125 years of the Diocese of Portsmouth**

**1882 - 2007**

### **Monday 21 May – St John’s Cathedral**

Homily of The Most Reverend Kevin McDonald Archbishop of Southwark

This evening is an evening of celebration and of thanksgiving – thanksgiving for 125 years of the life and work of this diocese. Perhaps some people might see it as the celebration of 125 years of independence, in which case it’s very gracious of you to have invited me here to be part of it. I think, in the first place, tonight we should give thanks for all those who have been part of the diocese since its inception, not simply as an acknowledgement of their contribution to the diocese but because the life of this local Church is part of the tradition of the whole Church: a context and period of time in which the communion which is the essence of the Church has been lived and received and handed on. Many of you may have in your minds and in your prayers this evening people who you have known and who have given a great deal to the diocese and have now gone to the Lord. They are with us now in the Communion of Saints and it is fitting that we should call them to mind in this Eucharist. In particular I would recall the former bishops of Portsmouth: Bishop Vertue, Bishop Cahill, Bishop Cotter, Archbishop King, Bishop Worlock, and Bishop Emery. It is important, too, to recognise the contribution of those people – laity, religious, clergy – who no one remembers but who in one way or another sowed seeds that have subsequently borne fruit or who laid foundation stones on which others have built, all during 125 years of sacramental life, of teaching, and preaching, of life in communion. A time of gifts and a time of blessing.

In the readings chosen for this Mass some sentences have particularly struck me. In the first letter of St Peter we hear the words: “See how I lay in Zion a precious cornerstone that I have chosen and the man who rests his trust in it will not be disappointed.”

God works in and through the Church. It is the sign and sacrament of his saving activity in the world. The creation of this diocese was and is part of God’s plan and purpose

for the Church. It was an initiative that invites our confidence and trust in God's action. And we are told that those who rest their trust in God's action will not be disappointed. This is a day of celebration and thanksgiving but also one in which we should be encouraged in committing ourselves to the life and work of the diocese and to its future. We put our faith in God and in his promises.

Then we heard St John's Gospel and the words that stayed with me were: "The hour will come when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem. The hour will come when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in Faith." These are important words to hear and reflect on in times of changing structures and new forms of pastoral provision. More important than the where and when of our worship is the *how*. That it be true worship – worship in spirit and in truth.

What, of course, has changed in 125 years is the context in which the Church works and worships. Last year, I read Judith Champ's biography of Bishop Ullathorne, the first bishop of Birmingham, and it struck me how different was the world they lived in, in the nineteenth century. We live in a globalised world, a world of massive secularisation accompanied by strong religious revival. We live in a Church in which ecumenical relations and interreligious dialogue are an integral part of what it means to be Church. A key text of Vatican II is where it says that the Church is a sacrament or an instrumental sign of intimate union with God and of unity for the whole human race. The Catholic Church has received all the gifts that God wants to bestow on his Church for its life and mission but we acknowledge the gifts received by other Christians and we seek to identify the values we share with members of other religions. We see the Church and the Catholic communities and schools as places where faith is handed on in its fullness but in a spirit of openness and dialogue. So a Catholic parish or community, and a Catholic school, is and should be a major contribution to social cohesion and to peace in the world. The Eucharist which we celebrate this evening is a sign of God's purposes and of human community as God wishes it to be. So, quite rightly, we reject the secular presuppositions that some seek to impose on our communities, agencies and schools. Our government needs to be religiously literate if it is to engage with contemporary culture in a way that will establish good communities which are peaceful and just.

Another way in which our situation has changed, and is changing, is the presence of Catholics from a wide variety of nations and cultures. Certainly when I came to south London and began going round the parishes for Confirmation this struck me very forcibly. But it is true here and in many parts of Britain. A Vatican document spoke of the presence of migrants as bringing with it an enhanced experience of catholicity. It presents many challenges and opportunities. But these are challenges and opportunities that all of us - clergy, religious, laity – must engage in together.

Sometimes we may be dismayed for all sorts of reasons and may wish things were different in the Church. We will certainly have strongly varying ideas of *how* things should be different. But we must look at the signs of the times and discuss together where the Holy Spirit is leading us. In Southwark we have a process of consultation going on but in Portsmouth you've been working on this for a long time. A while ago I read Bishop Crispian's 2005 Pastoral Plan, "Go out and bear fruit", and perhaps that is the spirit in which we should go forth from this anniversary celebration: grateful for the seeds that have been maturing, and open to all that the Lord can produce in and through us: ready to be generous in our service of Him and of one another. In hope and trust in God's promises let us look forward to the next 125 years.