

THE CALL TO NEW EVANGELISATION

This week, the 2011 National Census came out, the first since 2001. Britain is unique. Since the first census in 1851, there's always been a question on religion; sociologists have lots of data to work with. In the 2011 Census, we learn the number of people who say they are Christian has fallen from 71 to 59% and despite an influx of Eastern Europeans, Poles and others, mostly Catholic, the number of non-believers has now doubled to 1 in 4. This is a challenging picture we must come back to in a moment. The religious landscape would have been very different on this day in 1837, when with Augustus Welby Pugin, Bishop Griffiths laid the foundation stone for this splendid Norman Romanesque church, dedicated to St. James. Although it was an era when Catholics were still suspect, Victorian England was a church-going nation, over 6 in 10.

THE MANY MIRACLES AND SIGNS WORKED THROUGH THE APOSTLES MADE A DEEP IMPRESSION ON EVERYONE. Tonight, those words of 1stR make a deep impression on us too, as we thank God for 175 years of miracles and signs in this place. This church, as you know, stands within Reading Abbey, dissolved by Henry VIII in 1539, the last Abbot, Blessed Hugh Faringdon, being a martyr. We thank God we belong to this Tradition. We thank God too for the renovations and enhancements, now almost complete, of these last few months. I know everything has been done for the glory of the Lord. But on all our behalf, I'd like to thank profoundly Canon John, the architect and contractors, and all of you, donors and volunteers, for having made this church, this Temple of God's Presence, this oasis of peace in the middle of the town centre, truly a place of beauty, appropriate to the celebration of the sacred mysteries. A church is a powerful tool of evangelisation and catechesis, and as we bless tonight the new aumbry, the crucifix and the artwork in Our Lady's chapel, let us ask the prayers of St. James that the Holy Spirit will fill the hearts of all who come here, with a deeper faith in God.

IT IS IN CHRIST THAT WE WERE CLAIMED AS GOD'S OWN. In that 2ndR, St. Paul reminds us that it is God who has chosen us to be members of Christ's Body, the Church. In his Foreword to the excellent new book by John and Lindsay Mullaney about the founding of the parish, Canon John mentions the anniversaries we keep this year: 200 years since the consecration of the first chapel, 175 years since the foundation stone was laid, 50 years since Vatican II. To this we can add the present Year of Faith, which brings us back to the Census and the challenging picture it presents. Many are adrift. It's as if our land is becoming religiously a desert. Yet as experience confirms, water often runs underneath, which is why this Year of Faith is a wonderful opportunity. We need to pray for the conversion of England, for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, that faith in God may come to the surface, flourish and irrigate the soil. We are told, 1 in 8 are now foreign born, yet many immigrants, though Catholic, lapse from practice, which makes us ask how we can make our parishes more welcoming. St. James, with its many nationalities and liturgical variety, reminds us that ethnic diversity is a strong witness to the catholicity of the Church whilst on the other hand, the renovations of this building should help strengthen the unity of all in Christ. So in this Advent Mass, as we thank God for the past, let us place the future in his hands, saying with Mary in the Gospel LET WHAT YOU HAVE SAID BE DONE TO ME. Let us pray for a deeper faith ourselves, that all of us may find in the Heart of Jesus that true happiness for which we long.