

WOMAN, THIS IS YOUR SON

In the tiny Norfolk village of Walsingham in the year 1061, a noble-lady called Richeldis de Faverches is said to have had a vision of the BVM. Mary showed her the house of Nazareth, the home where the Annunciation took place, and asked her to build a replica of that house in the village. She did, and soon Walsingham became not only a place of piety but an international pilgrimage-centre for the mediaeval world. From kings to yokels, thousands flocked to the village to pray to God, to honour Our Lady and to seek answers, often miraculous, to their prayers. Although destroyed at the Reformation by Henry VIII, in 20C Walsingham was revived and today it flourishes as England's national Marian shrine. I'm also happy to say, it was on this very feast last year, 24th September, that I was ordained the eighth Bishop of Portsmouth.

THIS IS YOUR MOTHER. In today's Gospel, as he hung in agony on the Cross, Jesus entrusted his mother Mary to St. John. Then in turn, he entrusted John, and in him the universal Catholic Church, to Mary's protective care: WOMAN THIS IS YOUR SON. FROM THAT MOMENT we're told HE MADE A PLACE FOR HER IN HIS HOME. Everyone on earth wants to be happy in life, but as St. Augustine said, the human heart is restless until it rests in God. I would add too, that instinctively humans also seek a spiritual Mother, which is why down the centuries Christians have always flocked to Mary to find through her the God-Man and Saviour, Jesus Christ. As the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council Lumen Gentium put it, Mary is 'exalted above all angels and men to a place second only to her Son ... and she is rightly honoured by a special cult in the Church' (66).

I thank Fr. Maunder and St. Agatha's community for inviting me today to this splendid church, the Cathedral of the Car-Parks, which stands so close to our own Cathedral of St. John. Indeed, every time I leave Bishops House - to cope with the busiest and most frustrating set of traffic lights on earth! - it's always a great consolation that this church, used by the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, is also Catholic! Indeed, I wish very much our two parish communities, St. Agatha's and St. John's, to have the closest links possible for the sake of mission. The secular culture we inhabit is enthralling yet often toxic to faith; like the tarmac car park St. Agatha's overlooks, it's as if at times we are facing a religious desert. Yet we know that's not the case. For often deep down, rivers of spirituality and human need flow beneath; the challenge of the new evangelisation is to find ways to connect with this in order to offer people a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

WHEN THE APPOINTED TIME CAME, GOD SENT HIS SON BORN OF A WOMAN TO ENABLE US TO BE ADOPTED AS HIS SONS. In Fr. Dolling's time, Landport was an area of great deprivation. He wanted this church to serve the needs of the poor and to celebrate the sacred liturgy worthily and well. Those aims are surely ours too. For, to

paraphrase Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, the Jesus we love in the poor is the Jesus we love in the Eucharist. So in this Mass, let us call on the help of Our Lady of Walsingham for the people of our great city of Portsmouth that all may find their way to Christ her Son. And in this Mass, as Jesus lays down his life for us, leaving us an example that St. Agatha herself followed, let us pray for the grace to go from here to share that love with everyone we meet, especially the poor and needy.