

# Mary – Disciple and Sister

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*Homily given at Walsingham Ecumenical Vigil  
led by the Archbishop of Southwark & the Archbishop of York  
at St. George's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Southwark, 9<sup>th</sup> June 2000.*

I am very grateful to have been asked to preach at this service for unity organised by Walsingham. In the Middle Ages the Carmelite friars had a cluster of priories near Walsingham, at Kings Lynn, Burnham Norton and Blakeney. One of the friars from Blakeney, John Baconthorpe, went on to lecture in theology in Paris and was a champion of Mary's Immaculate Conception, while Alan of Lynn was a great supporter of the mystic Margery Kemp. I also noticed that in 1445 the then Archbishop of York, Cardinal John Kemp, was given permission to take time out from his duties as Archbishop and Lord Chancellor to spend time in prayer at Aylesford Priory. Perhaps some of these links could be reasons for my being here this evening.

## **Spontaneous faith**

The other morning I was walking along the Rosary Way at Aylesford and I stopped by one of Kossowski's beautiful ceramics. Just then a group of nine-year-olds came rushing up chorusing "Look the Spirit coming down on Our Lady and the Apostles." Their joy and spontaneity was wonderful and they underlined Christ's praise of the simplicity of children in praising God. Their childlike faith, their openness was an inspiration. Let us hope that all of us in the spirit of St Therese of Lisieux can have such faith.

The picture of Mary at prayer with the disciples filled with the Holy Spirit is important as we try and understand her role in the work for unity. Carmelites like to see Mary as the great disciple; the woman of faith who, guided by the Spirit, ponders the word of God. Jesus praises Mary not just because she is his mother but because she heard the word of God and believed. It is the quality of her faith, her openness to God that matters.

Carmelites also are very aware of Mary's presence and we prefer to call her our sister. Seeing her as a sister makes her more of a person and we believe that in the communion of saints her love for the Church today is as caring as her love for Jesus Christ during his earthly ministry.

## **Mature and decisive faith**

Mary, as seen in the Scripture, is a person of decisiveness and maturity. She journeys with Jesus, ready to face into demands and pressures of his ministry, ready to be one among the many disciples. She is also a person of sensitivity, building relationships. She cares for Elizabeth, sees peoples needs at Cana, shows courage at the cross and is involved in the life of the early Church. She is also a person who is ready to allow God's freedom in her life whether as a mother in bringing Jesus to a waiting world or being enabled to witness her son's resurrection in the Pentecost Community. She is an integral part of our Lord's saving work which we call the Paschal mystery.

Jesus came to proclaim God's kingdom - the ways of justice, peace, truth and mercy. Mary's great prayer, the Magnificat, proclaims these values and because she had integrity, purity of heart, she is a good model and guide for those who struggle for justice, for human rights. Mary's heart being focused like Jesus seeking God's will above all else means that she shows a way that avoids negative anger in the face of injustice. In opposing violence and inhumanity we never want to buy into the realities we oppose.

### **Inviting a united faith**

The recent meeting of Roman Catholic and Anglican bishops in Canada has agreed to place Mary's role in the work of salvation on the agenda of ARCIC II. This proposal will enable Catholics and Anglicans to see Mary's role and value her contribution. The Swanwick agreement in the late 1980s inspired by Cardinal Hume asks us as Christians to see ourselves as pilgrims journeying into the fullness of life. In this context shrines like Walsingham, Lourdes and Aylesford have a vital role. The very act of pilgrimage helps us focus on our own journey in faith. When we gather at a shrine we join in prayer and share our faith but above all we have the chance to meet people in all their variety. I believe that shrines that honour Mary help people understand her place more powerfully as the one who leads us to her son and who is the great model of discipleship. Also the devotional side of shrines reminds us that our prayer needs to be grounded in both the human and the divine. Christianity is about Incarnation and rejoices in symbols and the senses. We only have to look at the riches of religious art and music to understand the importance of the sense.

However, I would like to see our great shrines being Open Doors that offer welcome to all who see God and God's truth; places where people in the spirit of Mary can pray, ponder, listen and accept each other. Mary always calls us to her son and her son wants unity. Let us pray that our shrines will be places of healing of past hurts, for real reconciliation of mind and heart creating conditions among the people to move into a future where, through Mary's prayers, we can be one in Jesus Christ.