



THE BAR CONVENT

Living Heritage Centre

The following homily was given by Bishop Terry Draine on the 250th anniversary of the Bar Convent Chapel.



2019.04.27 – 250th Anniversary of the Bar Convent Chapel

Even so, the Most High does not live in a house that human hands have built: for as the prophet says:

“With heaven my throne

And earth my footstool,

What house could you build me,

What place could you make for my rest?

Are the Scripture telling us we don't really need buildings, that what we have done here is a waste of time and money? It's a question you can't help ask yourself when you hear this quote.

For the Jewish people the Temple in Jerusalem was the physical embodiment of God's presence among them. It was the channel of his grace, the means of communicating with him and the ark where his glory dwelt. As they went on pilgrimage to the Holy City, they would enter into a valley and then rise up on the other side to see the

magnificent site of the Temple, shining and glittering in the morning sunlight or in the setting sun, depending on what time of day they finished the journey. Their hearts would swell with joy and, despite their weariness after the long hard journey, they would burst into song. We have some of their songs recorded in the psalms; they are called the songs of Ascent. I am sure the words of our psalm today would not have been far from their thoughts and their lips:

Come, ring out our joy to the Lord;

hail the rock who saves us.

Come in; let us bow and bend low;

let us kneel before the God who made us

for he is our God and we

the people of his pasture,

the flock that is led by his hand.

The Gospel at mass today offers us a very traditional description of the Church which has been strongly identified with Catholic Ecclesiology. The Church is founded by Christ on the Rock of Peter,

who has the power of binding and loosing, and the powers of evil will never defeat it.

You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. And the gates of the underworld can never hold out against it

Another ancient images of the Church which was revived and put into relief by the second Vatican Council was the Church as a Pilgrim People; the Church journeying together through the realities of this world and this life but heading towards another reality and another life, the reality of the fullness of the Kingdom and the sharing of the life of the Trinity for ever. Salvation has been won, we are already given it as a free gift, and we are offered all the means of attaining it. We are the people who struggle along in that mid-land between the Resurrection and the completion of all things when the Kingdom will come in all its fullness. We are on the way, we are travelling, in transit, no abiding city, no certain resting place in this world. Throughout the ages the Church has never ceased to remind itself of these facts.

The reality is that as human beings there is an innate desire to find a home, to BE somewhere, to belong, to rest, be at peace, have sure foundations, to have some security. These desires, drives, forces, aspirations, whatever you want to call them, are behind and before most of our actions and plans. It is so easy and natural to focus all our efforts into some form of nest-building. The voice of the Lord in the Scriptures and in the teaching of the Church warns us not to be seduced and tempted to end our journey before we reach our true destination.

This Church whose anniversary we commemorate today is a sign of the physical embodiment of God's presence among us. It is the channel of his grace, the means of communicating with him and the place where his glory dwells.

However, it is here, in this place because Mary Ward first and foremost listened to God's call and began to walk with Jesus

wherever he led her. That journey was not easy, as we all know; however, *Mary Ward was aware that in becoming a disciple of Jesus she also had to accept the mystery of the Church. Even when she saw her work destroyed by the authority of the Church, she remained obedient, remained, in a rebellious age, firmly anchored in the Catholic Church.*¹ Others followed her and her example, including Mother Frances Bedingfield, to whose courage and determination we owe thanks as we sit within the shelter of this building.

Despite trouble within and without, this brave, courageous but small band of women continued with their work of education. Even in the stern face of the penal laws they literally stood their ground. *“I have consecrated myself to the service of God to labour for the salvation of souls in this house and while a wall of it is still standing, I will never leave it.”* So proclaims Sister Eleonora Clifton when it appeared that the sisters were going to be thrown out of their house.

¹ Homily by Cardinal Josef Ratzinger 23.01.1985, Fourth Centenary of the birth of Mary Ward – Basilica of St Mary Major.

It was however, Mother Ann Aspinall, a Lancashire woman born in 1710 and made Superior in 1760, who began the work of building a chapel, this chapel. Although we do not know very much about the actual process of building, she writes about the chapel in a letter in 1767, *“It is said, that when completed, it will be the handsomest and most commodious in these parts.”*

So that is part of the pilgrimage that brings us to this spot. Lots of ups and downs, surrounded by courageous and inspired decisions, peppered with some pragmatism but always inspired by hope and trust and certainly guided by God’s Gracious Providence.

Yes, it is good to celebrate the anniversary of a building. It is right and fitting, and it is what we Christians do; we celebrate everything in the light of God’s everlasting love towards us. However, in the end it is not because of the bricks and mortar that we are celebrating but what they symbolise and enable – the gathering of God’s people in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the praise and worship of the Father

through Jesus Christ, his Son. This is the essence, this is what today's celebration is about and in the end it goes beyond bricks and mortar, paint and decoration. It is about the precious cornerstone, Christ himself and the living stones which make the spiritual house that is us, the people of God.

So we thank God for all that has brought us to this day and we remember now and always the words from our second reading:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who called you out of the darkness into his wonderful light.

And I can do no better in summing up our thanks by offering you the words of the preface which we will hear during the course of the mass:

For in this visible house you never cease to show favour to the family on pilgrimage to you - you wonderfully manifest and accomplish the mystery of your communion with us. Here you build up for yourself the

temple that we are and cause your church to grow ever more and more as the Lord's own Body, till she reaches her fullness in the vision of peace, the heavenly Jerusalem.

Amen. So be it.