

PILGRIMAGE TO WALSINGHAM 2016

*"Sing and rejoice, daughter of Zion, for lo, I come and I will dwell in the midst of you, says the Lord."
(Zechariah 2:10)*

I had been 8 years since our last parish pilgrimage to the National Shrine of Our Lady in Norfolk. Time to go again!

For some of our 29 pilgrims on Monday May 9th it was a return visit; for others their first - and in some ways they were to be envied, coming fresh to this beautiful, sacred place. For it is truly a most blest and uplifting experience to arrive somewhere you have read about, heard others praise and recommend, and finally get to see for yourself.

A coach trip is transformed when in good company, no better than amongst friends and fellow pilgrims. We came from both 'sides' of our two-church parish: from Our Lady's, Marnhull and St Benedict's Gillingham, plus four lovely ladies from St Edward's Shaftesbury - and of course, the very best coach driver EVER from Grosvenor Travel - Fred, you can never retire!

After the blessing prayers given by Father Martin, we remembered all those who were unable to be with us and those who had finished their life's pilgrimage but would not be forgotten.

The weather was sunny with some 'dampness' but this combination only enhanced the beauties of the English spring. The fields and hedgerows were at their best, quiet and peaceful countryside, almost a step back in time.

As we manoeuvred the final narrow lanes an excited impatience infected us all - and a few tears of joy too for Walsingham is lovely, not only as a quintessential English village but as a holy place, the source of grace and God's blessing upon those who come to praise, to give thanks, to ask for strength in bearing individual crosses, to commend the needs of others to Holy Mary, the dear Mother of us all. Her presence was real, and not in a spiritual way alone.

We arrived at Elmham House, the pilgrim hotel and bureau on the village's centre, pretty well on schedule, collected keys, found our various rooms and congregated in the dining room for tea and scones. The rest of the day was free until dinner; before that we attended Evening Prayer in the Parish Church of the Annunciation, next door. This is a fairly new build - I remember the previous church (from my first visit in 1970!): it was a 1950's 'temporary' structure which as it turned out had to last until 2005! The present church is designed in the form of a Norfolk barn, spacious and filled with light and it was a true pilgrim's experience to begin our stay (apart from the scones!) with the Prayer of the Church, said with fellow pilgrims from the Wirral.

After dinner some could not keep from their comfy beds! Others strolled around the village or met in the bar of the pub next door (what a satisfactory combination: hotel, church, pub!)

Tuesday began damp. After Morning Prayer and the Angelus in the church with our new friends from up north, a group headed off to walk the Pilgrim Way to the Shrine, with others getting taken by coach, to begin the devotions offered at the Shrine every day of the year: the Sacrament of Penance, the Angelus and Pilgrim Mass, with time to walk around the outdoor Stations of Mercy, movingly illustrated with photos and prayers referring to the Year of Mercy. We began though with passing through the Holy Door, decorated with yellow roses, into the two tiny chapels in the original building dating from the 14th century: firstly the life-size Crucifix in a tiny anteroom, then the Chapel of the Holy Spirit and the Sipper Chapel. This is so named as it was in fact the final stopping place before pilgrims walked the last mile to the original shrine barefoot. Some prayed the Rosary here, before the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham. It is close to a copy of the original which had been taken to London and burnt - yes, burnt! - by Henry the Eighth in his horrific response to being refused a divorce from his poor queen, Katherine, so that he could marry Anne

Boleyn. Mary, crowned Queen of Heaven, is holding the lily, symbol of purity and the Annunciation when Jesus became Incarnate, the Word made flesh. She presents to us the Christ Child, who holds the Gospels, pointing to His mother in blessing. It is a small statue, most are surprised when they see it for the first time, but it is an emotive link with all those pilgrims from centuries past, back to its beginnings in 1061 when the Lady Richeldis built a replica of the Holy House of Nazareth; with those who suffered and even died for the Faith; with those who worked so hard to emancipate the Catholic Church (1829); and with the dedicated Catholics who renewed this great historic centre of worship from 1896, when it was first rescued by Charlotte Pearson Boyd, and reinstated the pilgrimage in the twentieth century.

A note about the Year of Mercy might be helpful here for those readers on our website who are unfamiliar with it: Pope Francis has declared this a twelve-months devoted to reaching out to all in need of mercy in their lives (which is everyone!) We need to show mercy to others but also to ourselves, to see the grace found in repentance, changing our lives for the better, for reconciliation in families, communities, yes, even in political life. This mercy can be found in Jesus Christ, who came to save us and restore us to the love of the Father, renewing us in the Holy Spirit who will give courage and healing to all who ask. Passing through a Holy Door in one of the world's cathedrals or basilicas (the shrine at Walsingham was granted the status ob basilica last year) is a symbolical gesture which brings us into a holy place where mercy may be found. Anyone can confess their sins to a priest, who represents Jesus Christ our Saviour, and find renewal in this way so if you can, find one of these places, go through the Holy Door and see where it takes you!

The much larger Chapel of Reconciliation, consecrated in 1981, and necessary for the great crowds which converge nowadays, is beautiful with a huge clear window behind the altar which can be folded back when the outside area is also fun. This window is finely etched with the figures of Our Lady and Richeldis on the left and Mary and the Angel Gabriel on the right. There are always small groups of Day pilgrims, people on their own or families, as well as those like us staying for longer. (At the weekends bug pilgrimages come from all over the country.) Our box of petitions, prayers of particular needs, was carried up to the altar with the Offertory procession, to be placed before the statue in the Slipper chapel afterwards. This was a most moving expression of faith.

At lunch time we headed back into the village on the coach. Some stayed for a quiet afternoon and the rest set out for a trip to the seaside and a wet but peaceful stroll around Wells-Next-The-Sea, only a few miles away. What an extra joy when Monica, a dear friend, retired to Norfolk some years since, just happened to be there that day! The short visit culminated in a trip back to Walsingham on the little steam train - now that really was a step back in time! Some even braved the rain and perched in an outside 'carriage' as we trundled through hidden fields and tractor crossings, accompanied by rabbits, pheasants and partridge, all moving faster than us....

More free time before dinner to wander round. There are some nice religious shops in the High Street - a far cry from High Streets as we usually know them. All the buildings are lovely and a small window in the great doors of the Priory grounds where the original Shrine, destroyed by King Henry was cared for by Augustinian Canons, revealed a vista of trees, flowers and Gothic arches. There is so much to see in Walsingham, to savour at a slow pace, a few days is never enough.

An evening passed pleasantly as before; some sitting quietly together, some a little more lively in the Black Lion...

Wednesday allowed for free time after breakfast and prayers until 11.30 am. Many visited the Anglican shrine, with a replica of the Holy House of Nazareth, several side chapels, many statues and pretty gardens. But first we raided our coach and carried down to the 'Let the Children Live' charity shop the various boxes of items collected from home which delighted - and amazed - the shop volunteers. They had been notified of our gifts but it really was a treasure trove as we staggered in! It made the generosity of so many, some of whom could not join us on our pilgrimage, well worth the effort in donating - and making- such lovely things. N.B. Anyone

planning to go to Walsingham, please do the same if possible! There is also an 'Aid to the Church in Need' charity shop if you collect in super-abundance!

More time at the Shrine from midday allowed for Rosary and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, a visit to the Shrine shop and pleasant cafe, another wander in the grounds before heading back to Elmham House.

A highlight for two of our number was a pre-dinner visit to the Little Sisters of St Charles de Foucauld who have a house in the village with a small chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved. One of the sisters works in the hotel and also produces charming pottery Nativity figures so watch out at Christmas for the dearest Bambino ever!

The village Farm Shop is also worthy of a mention, selling excellent local produce...

After dinner we processed to the pretty garden at the rear of the hotel and sang our praises before the mini shrine with our candles lit in the disk. It was tempting to have an early night - being a pilgrim is a taxing activity! - but again some of us forced ourselves into the pub bar whilst others socialised in the sitting room. Seriously though, it is a blessing in itself to have the opportunity to spend time together when at home we are too often rushed and distracted with the demands we all have in our lives. And here it is the place to mention those who were unwell during our stay in various ways but offered up their crosses and did all they could to be a pilgrim.

Leaving is always tinged with sadness. Some pondered whether they would ever be able to return; some were already planning to come back. The call of Our Lady in Walsingham is strong, the needs of a troubled world, and nation, are never ending and as the people of God we humanly long to be in a place that is special, holy, a place we feel at home and where we know our troubled hearts will find rest. As Father Martin called down a blessing on our return journey we each added our own prayers that our efforts would be blessed and our lives the richer for the devotion we had showed in our pilgrimage to Walsingham, the little Nazareth and Mary's Dowry where we commended England to her loving care.

Annette