

Brentwood Centenary

22 March 2017

Two weeks ago, ten thousand young Catholics from across England and Wales were gathered at Wembley for Flame 17, an opportunity to pray, to learn and to celebrate their faith. While in their company, I remembered the stirring appeal of Pope Francis to young people: 'If you want to be people of hope, then go home and talk to your grandparents.' He added: 'Ask them questions because they have the memory of history, the experience of living, and this is a great gift for you that will help you in your life's journey.'

Today, as we celebrate the centenary of the Diocese of Brentwood, we look to our grandparents in faith. We look to them with gratitude for all that they have done in establishing this diocese, and in nurturing the faith of Catholics in East London and in Essex.

Now I don't count myself among the grandparents, although the deep links between the Dioceses of Westminster and Brentwood could be cast in that mould. What I do treasure are my personal links with this diocese, not least the Episcopal Ordination of Bishop Alan, such a memorable occasion. But my link goes back much further, as the first titular cathedral I was given was the Chapel of St Cedd, at Bradwell-on-Sea, a place much treasured in this diocese and from where St Cedd first brought the Gospel to these parts.

Then, more importantly, I think of your first bishop, Bishop Bernard Ward and his fondness for railways. It was from that love of the rail network that your cathedral is here in Brentwood and that Brentwood is the very name of your diocese. So I smiled when I received a letter from Bishop Alan, in preparation for coming to this Mass, which told me which train to catch!

Every one of Bishop Ward's successors had their particular qualities: it fell to Bishop Beck and his successor Bishop Wall to rebuild schools and churches after the war; Bishop Casey is remembered for his immense fatherly kindness, while Bishop Thomas McMahon brought so many gifts to the diocese, not least in building this cathedral in which we celebrate Mass this evening.

These are just a very few of the memories that provide the context for our celebration today. They must not be left in the history books. Indeed, as Pope Francis reminds us, they can and must help us in our responsibility for the continued flourishing of the Catholic faith in this part of the world.

Isn't it lovely, then, that the readings chosen for this Mass have a certain emphasis on the future.

The First Reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, looks to what the Lord will do. 'I am going to look after my flock... I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage the wounded and make the weak strong.' We are to cooperate in that work,

lending our hands and our hearts to its achievement, knowing it is always the work of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the great commission given by Christ to the Apostles in the Gospel to 'go and make disciples of all nations' is only possible because he also makes this promise: 'Know that I am with you always, yes, to the end of time.'

This Gospel command gives the basis for another great theme of Pope Francis: that we are always to think of ourselves, and to live, as 'missionary disciples'. The Second Reading gives us clues about how we are to go out and do it. St Paul reminds us that not everyone is the best of teachers; not everyone has an instantly attractive personality; not everyone is good with the sick. But, each of us does have a particular giftedness, not granted to another. Discerning what that may be and how best it is put to service is essential to a healthy Church. We are, thank God, rich in our diversity in so many ways. But, if we are truly to flourish, that diversity must always be placed at the service of the fundamental unity of the Church and of her mission, and never remain a cause of separateness within our community.

In all our efforts to further that mission, faith finds a most eloquent expression when it is grounded in the real circumstances of life. Pope Francis recently reminded us of this when he said, 'You learn to do good with concrete actions, not with words. With deeds... For this reason Jesus... rebukes this ruling class of the people of Israel, because "they talk and don't act"'. Then he added that without this concrete

action there can be no true conversion. Action is the test of our faith.

Again, our efforts for the future can take inspiration from the memory of the past, of our grandparents. Their extraordinary efforts at renewal in the face of the devastating bombing of the Second World War are among the more tangible pieces of evidence of concreteness in faith, sometimes even literally. And there are so many others, perhaps now faded into history but still part of the fabric of this diocesan family. I think of the goodness of priests who went the extra mile to support their parishioners in times of sadness or tragedy. In the sight of God, and in many memories, this is never forgotten. I think of the ministry of so many religious women, including my own Auntie Peg, Sister Thomas More of the Chigwell Sisters (Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary), who played such a role in education and in service of the poor. This is never forgotten. The practice of faith and charity sustained by faithful Catholics in the face of daily challenges of many a sort: this too is never forgotten. We must heed, with the utmost seriousness, this call to the practical witness to faith if we are to succeed in our efforts at conversion, at spreading the Good News, for the next hundred years.

That is not to say, of course, that prayer and attentiveness to the Word of God become an optional extra. Practicality and prayer are two sides of the same coin: if one spreads faith, the other nurtures faith within us. Together they help us to see

our responsibilities within a context that is so vast as to be eternal. We sang at the start of Mass, 'Praise to the Holiest in the height, and in the depths be praise; in all his words, most wonderful, most sure in all his ways!' As we seek to hold together the faith we profess in word and the faith we express in action, we strive always to mirror something of the surety and wonder of Christ himself and always to the praise of our Heavenly Father.

The praise of God, for which we are gathered in the present, is rooted in thankfulness for the past and hope for the future. In a hundred years, an entirely new group of people will, please God, be gathered here for the bicentenary of the Diocese of Brentwood. Today we pray that we, and our children and grandchildren in faith, may be worthy successors of those whose memory we celebrate, and on whose witness we undertake to build.

May God bless richly this Diocese of Brentwood both now and in the years to come.

Amen.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster

