

## Homily for the Official Opening of Walsingham House at Abbotswick, 1<sup>st</sup> Sept 2018

I wish that I had met Sr Agatha in 1981. I would have loved to have met the lady who went to Bishop's house in Stock and, over lunch with Bishop Thomas, asked him for a house. And not just any house, a large house, with many bedrooms, and wonderful grounds, and outbuildings. This was Sr Agatha's dream, inspired by faith. And Bishop Thomas gave her a house ... an end of terrace house in Chadwell Heath, loaned by the Sisters of Mercy. Sr Agatha summarises how she felt leaving Bishop's house that day - "I was excited and despondent ... But I had arrived with nothing and come away with a house, so it must have been the Lord's work."

The Lord's work. That is what Sr Agatha writes again and again. Her motivation was so clear - Jesus Christ was the heart and centre of it all, together with Our Lady. I have heard stories of a completely broke Sr Agatha being handed envelopes of cash by strangers she never met before or since; stories of builders being laid off one day, then money arriving and work continuing the next day. She was a powerhouse of prayer and conviction. St Catherine of Siena says, "Be who God created you to be and you will set the world on fire." There is, dear friends, a real challenge for each of us in Sr Agatha's story - have we discovered who God created us to be? And are we acting on it? This house is here, today, because Sr Agatha did not let anyone dampen the dream. Five years after moving into Chadwell Heath, when she found this house, she knew immediately that it was the home she had dreamed of. Thank God for her faith, her conviction, and her persistence. Thank God for her brother Bill who did so much work here. Thank God for the volunteers across the decades who have sustained this house, and for the hundreds of adults who have visited, saturating the house and grounds with prayer. That mission continues – and everyone is welcome here, always.

The first reading, from the Prophet Micah, exhorts us to "Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God." Those words were on a little prayer card placed in my room the very first time I came to Walsingham House in Chingford. These cards were always given to guests, and I came to know those words very well.

Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God. In our Church right now there is a great hurt, a heart-ache and a terrible wound; abuse that has devastated lives. Today is not the day to dwell on that, though we pray fervently for all involved. And we pray that this House is an antidote, for this House welcomes young people leading very happy lives, and those needing great help. For each of them, it is a place of safety, and for some it is most certainly a place where healing begins. Let me try to illustrate what happens here. Amongst us is a headteacher whose school group were on retreat this summer. She drove from her school with hot dogs and buns which we cooked for the group lunch. Why did this matter? Because she did not want the children to bring packed lunches, because then those who were on school dinners would stand out. This is a school where some children have shoes held together with gaffer tape and where some parents rely on food banks.

So the headteacher came, and all the children were served hot dogs, and they had a fabulous retreat day, and that, dear friends, was the words of the prophet Micah in action. Tenderness, love, justice, humility.

Today's Gospel reading will take some people here back to 1995. It is the Gospel that was chosen for the final Mass at Walsingham House in Chingford, and the first Mass at Walsingham House in Canvey - another house, incidentally, loaned by the Sisters of Mercy! The little mustard seed that becomes the sheltering tree, the place of rest. In the same years that Sr Agatha found Abbotswick, Fr Pat Sammon and Sr Margaret Soper caught a new vision for Youth Ministry - the vision inspired by Pope, now Saint, John Paul II who started World Youth Day and who said to young people gathered in Cardiff, "In the Church of today, you are the hope of tomorrow." Thirty years before Pope Francis said it, Fr Pat, Sr Margaret and the Brentwood Ursuline Sisters believed "young people are the best evangelisers of other young people." And so the ministry began, in Chingford, of a young team leading retreats for those just a few years younger.

It is such a fragile model - it is raw and messy; sometimes young people get things wrong. There is a former team member here who once - as the punchline to a joke in a talent show - cracked an egg over the head of a senior teacher in one of our schools. As the teacher sat shocked and speechless on the little stage in the main room at Canvey, egg yolk dripping down her face and pieces of egg shell embedded in her hair, it was clear that she was going to take rather a lot of convincing about the benefits of peer led youth ministry.

And yet, when young people come on retreat, or they come to Lourdes, and they are met with young leadership, the dynamic is transformed. There is a joy, energy and authenticity that breaks down barriers, opens doors and opens hearts. I have watched in awe, and I have heard, so very many times, as 19 year olds journey with 15 year olds, the extraordinary sharing of faith, the questions asked and answered with the vocabulary and images of the young, the witness to faith through patience, kindness and utter self giving. We have such a treasure in our young leaders, in our young teams. There is a radical innocence and zest summarised by young people here who have taken bread, ham and cheese from their Lourdes hotel breakfast table and given it to the homeless in the Lourdes streets. There are young leaders here who have helped young people through their first nervous moments of encounter with ill and elderly pilgrims in Lourdes, and who have then watched, with tears in their eyes, as these young people very naturally and sensitively draw stories and memories from the Lourdes pilgrims that enrich all who listen to them. Just this year they met George - and he was so nervous about speaking to young people, but they charmed him, and then he told them of his life as a young engineer in Alaska, and of his courtship - by letter - with his wife Ann, and they were transfixed, and his pilgrimage was transformed. There are young leaders and team members here who have sat - literally and metaphorically - with their arm around the shoulders of another young person, listening to them, praying with them, and - as they pour out their stresses - offering them the hope that infuses our faith, just by being there, as Christ's compassion, in a moment when it is so needed.

If we can show young people that they are welcome, no matter what, that they are made in God's image and likeness, that they are beloved and included, no matter what; if we can show them the Blessed Sacrament as a sign of pure love, a place where they are adored by Christ precisely in the same moment as they adore Christ; if we can journey with them as they grapple with stress and self-esteem, sexuality and poverty, social media and family break up - if through all of that they discover other young people who will lead them with Christ's compassion, tenderness and inclusion, along with priests, teachers, chaplains, Bishops, parents, grandparents and catechists who will support them on the journey - and for whom this is also a house of welcome - well, dear friends, all of that truly is the shelter in the branches of the Divine mustard tree.

In Summer Lourdes with Fr Bob, and at Easter Lourdes with HCPT, there is yet another dimension, as young people discover that to work with children and adults in physical and mental need is to find in ourselves a fresh perspective on life, a fresh appreciation of what we have. But that could feel like it is one way, and it isn't. Rather, the particular brilliance of Easter Lourdes is the way our young adults receive from those who are ill and in need; there is something about an encounter with the pure, unfiltered joy of the children which is a true meeting with Jesus Christ. At HCPT Easter Lourdes, perhaps more than anywhere else, we discover the truth of Jesus call to us to "be like little children." Today we celebrate 40 years of Easter and Summer Lourdes, thousands of young people who have travelled on coaches across France to help and to be helped.

Later in this Mass our chapel will be dedicated. The dedication is in three parts, and perhaps a little unusual. Firstly, we dedicate our chapel to Jesus the Adolescent - Jesus the teenager. They are the "hidden years" in Jesus life, but how it matters to our teenagers to know that Jesus was a teenager too. We dedicate our chapel to Our Lady of Walsingham, with the statue that stood in the hallway in Chingford, and the chapel in Canvey, now here, in our new chapel. Our Lady of Walsingham has been on the journey with us - and how fitting that it was the Community of Our Lady of Walsingham who prayed here and who cared for this house for 13 years before moving to Walsingham. And we dedicate our Chapel to St Francis of Assisi; this house will be home to Brentwood Caritas, and there is a dream of opening it each summer for families who could not get a holiday otherwise - we'll need help with that. St Francis reminds us of radical faith, and radical poverty, and brings me back to the roots of all this, and to Sr Agatha, who was a Franciscan Missionary Sister of the Immaculate Conception. The mustard seed, it seems to me, is nurtured in the fertile soil, and watered with the flowing spirit, that Sr Agatha lived, and that was named on those guest cards in Chingford. The spirit with which I pray we welcome every visitor, of all ages, to the chapel and grounds, which are always open for you here at Walsingham House at Abbotswick, the spirit of the Prophet Micah; "Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God."