

Homily for Youth Mass in the presence of the relics of St Bernadette, 16th October 2022

What a privilege to be here, tonight, in such a sacred moment. We've just heard an image of prayer, and persistence – the woman seeking justice. We can imagine her knocking at the judge's door; in our prayers we knock at the door of God's heart. And sometimes it is turned a hundred and eighty degrees and God comes knocking at the door of our heart. Now it is pretty certain we are not going to hear a knocking coming from that beautiful box containing St Bernadette's relics, but we certainly hear an invitation, and some wise and beautiful words. So please, listen in – but as you listen, give your whole attention to the box – the reliquary. Written on one side is the phrase **“Il suffit d'aimer.” “To love is enough.” You could reflect and pray about that phrase for hours. “To love is enough.”** Another time she put it like this: “I shall spend every moment loving.” Perhaps those are the words that knock on the door of your heart?

Or perhaps it is this. St Bernadette said, **“If your dream should fall and break into a thousand pieces... never be afraid to pick one of those pieces up and begin again. That's the beauty of being alive... We can always start all over again.”**

There is such joy and inspiration in those words – and yet we can also feel the searing pain of someone who has known hard times and shattered dreams. We'll come to that. Just for a moment, consider what is in the reliquary. Some pieces of St Bernadette's skin, little fragments of her thigh bone, and some of her hair. They were part of a medical examination when she died; people trying to understand the miracle of Lourdes through Bernadette. And then those little fragments of her stayed on the shelf in a doctor's office, until they were returned to the priests of Lourdes, and honoured as relics. Usually they stay in Lourdes. But for the last six weeks they have been on the road in England, Wales and Scotland. And now St Bernadette is in Essex for the very first time. And you are as close to the physical remains of St Bernadette as you could possibly be. Notice the moment.

But we can't just stay with the physical. Keep looking at the reliquary but adjust your vision. A great French writer, St Exupery, said, “What is essential to the heart is invisible to the eye.” Dear friends, look with your hearts at the reliquary.

Pope Benedict XVI catches it so well when he says, “The Church does not forget that, in the end, these are indeed just human bones, but they are bones that belonged to individuals touched by the living power of God. The relics of the saints are traces of that invisible but real presence which sheds light upon the shadows of the world.” When Bernadette Soubirous was 14 she was from a family that was so poor they lived in the town prison, six in one room. She had asthma. She wanted to be like her strong siblings and cousins but

when they went to collect firewood they had to cross the river, which was so deep they had to go across barefoot. As that would have meant Bernadette's feet getting cold and wet, her mother said there was no way she could go over the river. So she only went as far as the cave – in French, la Grotte. It was February 11th 1858.

Picture the teenage Bernadette sitting in the cave, perhaps a bit tetchy, cold or hungry, irritated that her friends had gone off on to the other side of the river. Her concerns may stir deeply in your heart – as Bernadette contemplates her life, let her questions mingle with yours. Perhaps there are times – maybe even this very evening – where you feel alone. Perhaps you are ill – or you have a friend or family member that is ill – and the illness makes no sense to you, and saddens you, or frightens you. Just as Bernadette may have felt distress when her chest tightened with asthma. Perhaps your family is suffering from cold or hunger, or you know people who are. Dear friends, put your teenage hand into Bernadette's teenage hand. Feel her pulse of faith and trust that she understands you.

And into that moment by the river in 1858 comes God's knock on Bernadette's heart, a knock that changes her life for ever. A lady appears, all in white, with a blue sash and gold roses at her feet. You may know the story of Lourdes, or it might be that after tonight you look into it. Here's a couple of definitive moments. The lady asks Bernadette to dig in the mud of the cave. Bernadette is doubtful but she trusts, and digs – and suddenly, from amongst the mud, water flows. Alpine water – crystal bright, clear and fresh. Just take that in, for a moment. Bernadette dug in the mud, and found clear water. What is the mud of your lives, the stuff that causes you anxiety or agony, grit or despair? Dare you believe that in those struggles there is clear, fresh water to be found? You may be worried about the state of the world, distressed about a friend who has got into bad habits. It's a swirl of mud and yet – and yet – there are clear waters here. The clear waters of faith. **The Divine and the physical meet. This is the miracle of tonight's Mass: those fragments of skin in the reliquary; they are from the hands, arms and body that dug into the mud that day. Those fragments of thigh bone; they supported the body while Bernadette dug. Put your teenage hand into Bernadette's teenage hand. Feel her pulse of faith. You are not alone. It is what the Saints do – they accompany us, and they understand us precisely because of the lives they have led. Let Bernadette accompany you.**

Back in Lourdes the lady says to Bernadette – go and tell the priests. Tell them what you have seen. And tell them to build a church, right here, and invite people to come in procession. Get them to bring candles. She doesn't say it all at once, by the way – there are 18 times that Our Lady appears to Bernadette. Read the story. But what happens when Bernadette goes to tell the priests? They don't believe her. They literally shut the door in her face. **Think about the hair in the reliquary; imagine it being blown by the draft of the slamming door. The young Bernadette outside, devastated. She is mocked. Her family are embarrassed.**

But through the ridicule, she does not give up. Remember her words: “If your dream should fall and break into a thousand pieces... never be afraid to pick one of those pieces up and begin again. That's the beauty of being alive... We can always start all over again.” Bernadette picks up the fragment of the dream, and she keeps going, back to the Grotto, back for more encounters with the beautiful lady, back and back until the moment of revelation of who the lady is – Mary.

Think about moments when your young voice has been silenced. When something you are passionate about has been ignored. And the next time you want to speak up – about injustice or the environment, about radically helping the poor, about living as Jesus lived welcoming everyone, with no exceptions or exclusions – the next time you want to raise your voice against a door slammed in your young face then notice Bernadette at your side. And – here’s a tip – speak calmly. Someone shouting has usually already lost an argument. Bernadette said, “My job is to inform, not to convince.” So speak as Bernadette did – calmly, clearly, and with the truth and love of faith. Inform, so that others may be convinced. And just as for Bernadette, the truth and love of faith will win through.

And if any or all of that is giving you a different vision of how the world could be, then come to Lourdes. Come next summer. If you are young, come to help those who are of different generations, so that they can experience Lourdes as well. If you are ill, or frail, come on pilgrimage knowing that you will be helped every step of the way. Tonight St Bernadette of Lourdes has come to us; next year, if you can, travel to her, and see just how the encounter of Our Lady of Lourdes with St Bernadette shapes the heart of a town. “I shall spend every moment loving.” You feel that love radiating and wonderfully lived in Lourdes, a town full of joy; a place where those who are ill always come first.

As you stand close to the reliquary after Mass, remember the fragments of skin, hair and bone are from the same body that saw Our Lady, in the cave in Lourdes. The hands that carried the first candle to the grotto. The legs that ran to and from the house of the priests, until they believed her. And remember those words of Pope Benedict: “The relics of the saints are traces of that invisible but real presence which sheds light upon the shadows of the world.” Whatever your shadows, tonight, bring them from your heart to the heart of a Saint who understands. Dare to pick up the fragment of a shattered dream – or help someone else pick up a fragment of their dream. Let Bernadette accompany you as you bring the shadows and lights of your life and heart to God. Here. Tonight. And when you go from here, may the words of St Bernadette direct your life: “Il suffit d’aimer” – “To love is enough.” “I shall spend every moment loving.”