

## Homily for the Mass for Migrants, St Joseph the Worker, 1<sup>st</sup> May 2023

It is wonderful to be here. Just look around you at the energy, the vibrancy, the joy and the faith of this gathering. What a gift! The church in London is blessed, enriched, and given fresh insights because of every person here, and every community and nationality that you represent.

And we celebrate a significant anniversary. Yesterday marked forty years since our Bishop was Ordained Priest. Congratulations and blessings, Bishop Alan.

In return, I know there is one thing Bishop Alan, along with Bishop Paul – and every Bishop who serves in London – would want to say to you. Thank you. Thank you for the amazing gift that you are to every parish community and every Catholic school in London. Thank you. Molto Grazie. Obrigado. Merci beaucoup. Vielen Dank. Dziękuję. Salāmat. Imeela. O se. Muchos Gracias. ... ! If I have missed the language you most comfortably speak, then please teach me after Mass. To you all, thank you.

A couple of years ago Pope Francis wrote a very significant letter, *Fratelli Tutti*. That title means, we are all brothers and sisters. *We are all brothers and sisters*. No ‘them’ and ‘us’, no walls and partitions. One of the most profound truths of our faith is that every person is made in the image and likeness of God. It is an awesome truth. Dare to believe it, about yourself and those around you. To know that everyone is made in God’s image and likeness – everyone - defines how we look at ourselves, and how we encounter every other person, whatever they look like, whatever language they speak, and wherever they have come from. Later in this Mass, when we pray the Our Father – *Our Father* – we will be invited to pray in whatever language we are most comfortable with. A prayerful expression of being sisters and brothers in the Lord.

Yes, this is church. A place where everyone is welcome. The Greek word for church – ekklesia – means gathering, coming together. And today we come together – we are church – of all nationalities and races. A vibrant, visible and vital sign that everyone is cherished, honoured and welcome.

It all chimes beautifully with this document, which our Bishops offered just a few weeks ago to every person in the country. It is called “Love the stranger.” [<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/love-the-stranger/>] And once we have loved the stranger, even just for a bit, they are no longer a stranger but a friend. That is surely a vision of heaven; a place where there are no strangers, but only sisters and brothers in the

Lord. That is the Kingdom of God that we are called to build, as Catholic Christians, wherever we live in London.

But to get there can take quite a journey. There are people here today who feel outsiders in their own communities, towns and parts of London. We are so blessed by the children leading the singing today, from St Antony's, St Bonaventure's and St Angela's schools. But behind those wonderful notes and harmonic melodies, there is a different tune. A few months ago the children sung for the Mayor of London, and the London Assembly. And then they spoke with them about what their parents faced at work, and how concerned they were because their parents were often not being paid properly, or working in jobs where they were abused. It was a poignant witness to struggle, and to faith.

So the journey from stranger to friend is not at all easy, but we are accompanied in the most beautiful way possible. Fifty years ago Pope Pius XII wrote a letter that took its inspiration directly from today's Gospel, with a very significant title: *Exsul Familia Nazarethana*. It means, *the exiled family of Nazareth*. Just rest with that for a moment. If you are ever completely overwhelmed, in tears because of the racism of work colleagues or people in your part of London, or what you see on the news, lift your sobbing heart to the Holy Family, *the exiled family of Nazareth*. Pope Pius XII said this: "*Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt to escape the fury of an evil king, are, for all times and all places, the models and protectors of every migrant, stranger and refugee of whatever kind who, whether compelled by fear of persecution or by need, is forced to leave their native land, their beloved parents and relatives, their close friends, and to seek a foreign soil.*"

Jesus, Mary and Joseph, living in exile in Egypt, understand so deeply the journeys that many of you have gone through, or journeys made by your parents or grandparents. They walk with you on a journey made because hunger, violence, persecution, war or terror forces you from your homes. They walk with you on a journey made because you want a different life for your family. They walk with you on a journey where you are a stranger to everyone you meet, until someone opens their heart, their home, and their arms and says to you, *Come in. You are welcome here*. And then, with Pope Francis, we can look at that from another angle, for sometimes we are the settled one, the one with the door that we can open to another. Pope Francis says: "*Every stranger who knocks at our door is an opportunity for an encounter with Jesus Christ, who identifies with the welcomed and rejected strangers of every age.*"

Pope Francis also reminds us of the immense richness that there is in diversity. If we only ever talk with people who look like us, think like us, and speak like us, *we are diminished*. Notice that. Any kind of

racism, any kind of exclusion, diminishes the person doing it. Why? Because part of the immense gift of welcoming the stranger is that we welcome a different perspective on life, different cultural experiences; our horizons are enlarged. Try to do that today – what a brilliant opportunity to meet a brother or sister in the Lord who has a heritage from an entirely different part of the world!

Consider this: there will be places where, if you knock on the door, there will be strangers on both sides of the door. You are a stranger to them, whoever ‘they’ are. And they are a stranger to you. Welcome the stranger, share a meal with the stranger, walk with the stranger, listen to the stranger, understand the stranger, love the stranger. It is exactly what Jesus did. It is how strangers become friends. It is how strangers come to see that they – we – are all sisters and brothers in the Lord.

Let’s draw all of this together by spending a moment with St Joseph the Worker, whose Feast Day we celebrate today. Every working person has such an immense patron; St Joseph *the Worker*. His hands scarred from the cuts and knocks of carpentry, roughened by carrying wood around the yard; those hands were the hands that held Mary and Jesus on that perilous journey from Bethlehem to Egypt. In the journeys that have left you terrified and exhausted, St Joseph the Worker is there. As you hold your children, your family, to protect them as mother or father, St Joseph the Worker, the great protector, is there. In work that is hard and unrelenting, where there are some of you working two, three and four jobs, St Joseph is there. In the delights in your family life, in the love of your children, in success in your work, in moments when you hold your child’s hand as they take their first steps, St Joseph is there. In championing the dignity of human work, and the need for a Real Living Wage, St Joseph the Worker is there.

And also, St Joseph the Worker is there in the silence of the night. So many of you are parents; on your journeys I am sure there are times where you are the last ones awake, listening to the ragged breathing of the children, perhaps asleep in a perilous place. And you pray for them. Or you are awake because of hunger, or worry because you don’t know how many hours you’ll be given to work next week. Think of St Joseph in Nazareth, and Bethlehem, and remember that as he slept, in the midst of so many doubts and fears, as he slept angels came, and pointed the pathway for him. And he followed God, and he journeyed on. But he never speaks. In the whole of the Bible, there is not one word that Joseph speaks. You too will know people like that, and how valuable they are. The ones that listen, the ones that are present, and strong, but silent. Pope Francis has a little statue of the sleeping St Joseph the Worker by his desk. When there is a problem he writes it on a bit of paper, and places it under the pillow of the sleeping St Joseph. It is an image of hope, tenderness and stillness. Our worries and stresses, prayers

for our families, our friends and our countries, resting – quite literally – in the love of God, giving space for angels to illuminate pathways for us. I hope that it is an image which helps you, if there is something giving you sleepless nights at the moment. Give your problem to the intercession of St Joseph the Worker, and let that give you the clear heart and hope that means you, too, can sleep.

If St Joseph had spoken, perhaps the most likely words he would have offered are the ones we heard in the first reading, from the prophet Micah. “Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God.” Live like that and surely we will love the stranger, welcome the stranger. Live like that, and what is “them” and “us”, will always be “we”. “Act justly, love tenderly, walk humbly with God.” St Joseph the Worker, pray for us.