

## House of God - Gate of Heaven

*Adapted from a sermon given at the Walsingham National Pilgrimage 2006 by  
Paschal SSF*



Walsingham evokes personal responses from each of us. It is where we feel at home; pray a little better; be ourselves; where laughter, feasting, penitence and renewal is as natural as the water bubbling-up in the Shrine Well; humanity and holiness infuse us with delight and fresh life. Walsingham brings heaven to us. Just as Jacob's vision in Genesis made him cry out, "This is none other than the House of God", the human Walsingham was made "England's Nazareth" by God, and no human authority could, ultimately, dismantle this

reality. Alleluia!

Yet Jacob's divine encounter was not in a shrine. He wasn't even on a pilgrimage. God was calling Jacob to make a pilgrimage within, to his heart, that place which is capable of containing all that is best and great in us and yet because of sin is also capable of producing what is lowest and basest too. We move from our hearts, more than our feet! There is one place above all others in Walsingham which captures the heart, and that is the Holy House. If only the walls could talk, they would tell us of whispered hopes, thankful Te Deums, secret struggles, new beginnings, hidden tensions, piercing hurts, conquered doubts, where, like a human rosary we recite the joyful, sorrowful, illuminative and glorious mysteries of our lives, before Our Lady of Walsingham.

The Holy House is a little place, because it mediates Nazareth to us so that we might dwell in the Annunciation. It reminds us that the gate of heaven is the narrow gate of which the Lord speaks in the Gospel. (Matt.7.13-14) Erasmus writing in 1511 to Henry VIII about the Holy House said, "There is a small chapel, which admits by a small narrow little door on either side, those who come to salute our Layde; the light is feeble, in fact scarcely any, excepting from wax candles." No great West Door here! What would happen if every Pilgrim group tried to make their 'First Visit' straight from their coaches with their entire luggage? To enter the Holy House you can't be carrying too much stuff!



Consider the words of St Paul, 'Having nothing, yet possessing all things'. (2 Cor. 6.10) Our Lady, herself the gate of heaven for Christians, gives us an example of what these words mean. She who at Nazareth let go of everything, surrendering herself to the will of her Creator is greeted, "Hail Mary, full of Grace". She was full, because she emptied herself - her only treasure was to possess God and be possessed by Him. The Annunciation was a sudden moment of radical decision: To defend self or surrender? "Let it be to me according to your Word".

Mary's exaltation came via self-emptying, the Gospel way of paradox - dying we rise, letting go we find true life, humbling ourselves we find we are raised up. Yet we find it so hard, and what we have to let go of is different for all of us: St John of the Cross asks us to imagine a bird tied down with something around one of its legs. It could be a thick piece of rope or it could just be a silk thread. Whichever it is, the bird cannot fly! Sometimes what holds us back is not clear and obvious but something almost hidden from us. Perhaps we need to let go of the unforgiving spirit that holds us captive to past hurts; or negative emotions; anger, greed, pride and lust. Perhaps we need to relinquish our desperate hold on our individualism, remembering that Heaven is the life of communion. Most of us have to stop clinging to convention and instead risk the Gospel promises. Mary beckons us to surrender all these things and to put our trust in a God who nourishes and sustains us.

But letting-go is the work of a life-time. That's why we come as pilgrims and go to Mass and Confession and the Holy Well again and again, for we need God's grace and Our Lady's prayers to help us. Grace is not a thing but God's loving relationship with us - although sometimes it makes us afraid, for we don't know what God might ask of us. Yet we mustn't run away when we are being emptied by God. We mustn't be frightened by our littleness, our inner poverty... even that is grace. We know that our faith can be paralyzed, stunted or sceptical; how our hearts can be fixed on self rather than God. That's why we fall on our knees for benediction, healing, reconciliation. Meister Eckhart says, "Stand firm and do not move from your emptiness". Don't rush to be filled with other things, don't be tempted by false teaching just because the revealed truths of the Catholic Faith can feel cramped at times. Don't allow your heart to be cluttered with stuff that doesn't really matter. Remember Mary's heart was always turned to God and His Reign.

People often regard Christians as missing out on something. But we know that although the door of the Kingdom remains narrow, courageous fidelity to the Gospel expands our hearts and leads us to abundant life. We have encountered Jesus and Blessed Mary and we trust the "Good News of the Narrow Way."

The Holy House reveals a God who is so great that He became so small; it reveals vulnerable love to be God's way of power; and it reminds us that when a creature like ourselves cooperates with Him, heaven is brought to earth.

So praise God for Walsingham for it evangelises our hearts and sets us free to live the little, narrow, Gospel way of paradox. And praise God for Mary, who shows us that by having nothing yet possessing all things we can become for others holy ground so that they might glimpse the light and joy of heaven.

House of God, Gate of Heaven, Our Lady of Walsingham pray for us! Amen.

*f*

*The National Pilgrimage occurs on the Monday of the Spring Bank Holiday weekend, i.e. 28 May 2007. For more information on it or on Walsingham: [www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk](http://www.walsinghamanglican.org.uk)*