

NATIONAL PILGRIMAGE

SHRINE OF OUR LADY OF WALSINGHAM

25<sup>TH</sup> MAY 2015

THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER

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The Mother of the Lord was there, as she so often was, mostly quietly in the background, pondering things in her heart, making sure everything was all right. Did you note yesterday that she was there when you celebrated Pentecost?

St Luke tells us she was there after the Ascension of the Lord with the eleven apostles. ‘When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.’

So, she must have been there on the day of Pentecost. ‘When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.’

Mary would have been there. Apart from the birth narratives and the visit to Jerusalem when the Lord is twelve years old, we only really catch glimpses of her. But enough to know she is often there, not pushing herself forward, but there: there at the wedding feast at Cana of Galilee, quietly drawing her Son’s attention to the fact that the wine has run out, accepting his assertion that this is not the time, but still seeing him do what she knows needs to be done; there when Jesus is speaking to the crowds, accepting his assertion that his blood family is nothing special, that every disciple is as close to him as his family; there when he hangs

on the Cross, accepting that she is to be given as mother to the beloved disciple, to the Church. Now Mary is there, when the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the apostles, at the birth of the Church, the Holy Spirit whose gift, our Lord Jesus Christ, she bore in her womb for nine months and carried in her arms after his birth and after his death as he was brought down from the Cross.

The old man Simeon's prediction had been fulfilled that a sword would pierce her own soul also. She suffered with her beloved Son our Lord Jesus Christ, now she was to reign with him in glory. Through darkness and light, in shadow and sunshine, through thick and thin, in pain and sorrow, in joy and triumph, Mary is there, there with her Son, there with the Church.

Here with the Church, as we celebrate all that our Lady means to us, and all that our Lady has meant to us through English history.

There is a particular moment in our national history that is reflected in the remarkable story of Westminster Abbey. Many kings and queens of England and of the United Kingdom have loved and adorned the Abbey, where they had been crowned and where many of them would be buried. Behind the Abbey's high altar, near the Shrine of St Edward the Confessor, king of England from 1042 to 1066, are buried medieval kings including Richard II with his queen. Richard inherited the throne in 1377 at the age of ten from his grandfather Edward III and reigned for only twenty two years until his deposition by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke who then reigned as Henry IV.

Richard II is not held out as the most shining example of kingship but one thing is sure: he was a man of immense piety, who loved the Abbey. The Wilton diptych, which you will have seen in the National Gallery,

depicts him, surrounded by saints who had altars in their honour in the Abbey, offering his kingdom to our blessed Lady as her dowry. His connection with the Abbey is still cherished.

In 1377, the Countess of Pembroke endowed a chantry chapel for masses to be said for the soul of her dead husband in a niche beside the chapel of St John the Baptist. She gave for the chapel an alabaster image of our Lady, which my predecessor the wonderful abbot Nicholas Litlyngton named Our Lady of Pew, a copy of the royal shrine to Our Lady of Pew in the Palace of Westminster, probably meaning Our Lady Puissant, the Virgo Potens, Our Lady of Power.

A few years later, in 1381, King Richard II suffered great anxiety as a result of the Peasants' Revolt, a major uprising against a poll tax. Wat Tyler and rebels from south-east England amassed at Blackheath and threatened Richard's reign. Later the king would meet a delegation at Smithfield. The chronicler Froissart gives a vivid description of the manner in which the young king Richard II prepared to meet the rebels:

'Richard II on the Saturday after Corpus Christi went to Westminster, where he heard Mass at the Abbey with all his Lords. He made his devotions at a statue of Our Lady in a little chapel that had witnessed many miracles and where much grace had been gained, so that the Kings of England have much faith in it.'

The rebellion failed and order was restored. The King saw this as a miracle granted through the intercession of our Lady, and sought to encourage her veneration at Westminster. He placed his Kingdom under our Lady's protection, in thanksgiving for having regained it. 'This is your Dowry, O Holy Virgin; therefore rule over it, O Mary.' Richard refurbished the chapel in the Abbey.

On 10<sup>th</sup> February 1399, he issued this proclamation. ‘The contemplation of the great mystery of the Incarnation has brought all Christian nations to venerate her from whom came the beginnings of redemption. But we, as the humble servants of her inheritance, and liegemen of her especial dower, as we are approved by common parlance, ought to excel all others in the favour of our praises and devotions to her.’

The image of Our Lady of Pew was removed from the Abbey at some point, although the colouring of the niche always preserved the place where the image had been. Then on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1971, following the initiative of a private benefactor and the work of Sister Concordia Scott of Minster Abbey on the Isle of Thanet, a new alabaster statue, modelled on the statue of our Lady of Westminster in Westminster Cathedral, was enthroned in the niche. Carved on its back is the prayer of our Lord *Ut unum sint*, that they may be one. A flourishing ecumenical Society of our Lady of Pew maintains the devotion.

All this is well and a blessing. But in that same small chapel, there is one remarkable carving from Richard II’s reign that has remained unchallenged and unaltered in the past six hundred and thirty five years. Visiting the Abbey, if you turn off the north ambulatory around the Shrine of St Edward and open the 14<sup>th</sup> century gates into the little chapel of our Lady of Pew with their prickets for the candles of the faithful, and stand in front of Mother Concordia’s image, then look up. On a boss above your head is a beautiful tiny carved image of our blessed Lady in red, her hands clasped in prayer, surrounded by six cherubs, kneeling on the cloud that is taking her to heaven: a 14<sup>th</sup> century image of the Assumption of our Lady, in Westminster Abbey, undisturbed by Protestant reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, puritans in the 17<sup>th</sup>, deists in the 18<sup>th</sup>, revisionists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and modernists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Through

thick and thin, she lifts to heaven the hearts and minds of any willing to look up from their daily cares and preoccupations and focus their minds instead on the goodness, beauty and mercy of almighty God.

Our Lady, he was sure, answered the call in trouble of Richard II, who gave his kingdom to the Lord's Mother as her dowry. No monarch or government has since revoked that dedication.

Just as our Lady in her lifetime on earth was true through thick and thin to her beloved Son our Lord, so we may be bold to say, she has been true through thick and thin to the body of Christ, the Church of which she is the Mother.

Just as, through times of good fortune and of ill fortune in our national life and in the life of the Church, her image has been steadfast and unchanging in the coronation Church at the heart of our nation, often unremarked, always there, so we can and should pray with confidence that her intercession and her example will bring renewal to our Church and, in our nation, new tenderness of mutual regard.

And just as she showed the Lady Richeldis a spring of water that has quenched the thirst and cleansed the spirits of countless pilgrims through a thousand years in this holy and beloved place, so she may refresh us and all those for whom we pray on this our pilgrimage day with a spring of water welling up to eternal life.