

HOMILY for the Centenary of Preston Carmel

13 May 2017

There are many people – including many here – who can speak far more eloquently than I about the Contemplative Life. There are many people – including many here – who can speak far more eloquently than I about Carmelite spirituality. Indeed there are many who do speak it not just in words but with their whole lives.

But that's for another time. Today we're celebrating this particular Carmel in this town of Preston and in this Diocese of Lancaster. For 100 years ago – in 1917 – this Carmel was established here in what, at the time, was part of a series of important developments. The Little Sisters of the Poor came in 1881 – initially to Deepdale Road, and St. Vincent's Home for Boys was opened in 1896. In between them, the Harris Orphanage for about 140 children, had opened in 1888 and Homes for the Blind were opened in 1896.

All of these developments reflect a response to the social needs prevalent at the time – for the young, the orphan, the disabled and the aged. It is quite extraordinary that all of these developments should have taken place within a very short span of time. They were being met in other places too, of course, but it is notable that all these were in this immediate area.

And as the social needs started to be met so too was the desire for spiritual backing. The Sister Archivist at Notting Hill tells about the work of Archbishop Whiteside of Liverpool in encouraging the establishment of Carmels at Knotty Ash, Liverpool, St. Helens, at Upholland and here in Preston in 1917. At the time, of course, the Diocese of Lancaster had not yet come into being.

In 1917 the Country was still at War and it seemed that the regulations and the scarcity of building materials would make such establishments impossible, let alone the shortage of men who were at war to do the building - but faith and determination have a way of seeing things through.

Cardinal Bourne shared Archbishop Whiteside's view that Contemplative Houses were essential to the welfare of the Church and the Nation and should be promoted at all costs. It was he who described Carmel as "a powerhouse of prayer". And so it was that Preston Carmel came into being.

From the beginning it seems that Preston took Carmel to its own and quite a few Prestonians joined the Community. Polly Kirkham entered Notting Hill Carmel in London but then transferred to the Preston foundation, taking the name Sr. Mary Teresa upon receiving the Carmelite habit. Winifred O'Neill also joined, taking the name Sr. Mary Winifred. Both lived long and happy lives in Carmel and died at a good old age. (I think some of their relatives may be here today). Dorothy Myerscough entered as Sr. Teresa of the Child Jesus, and Marie Baines took the name Sr. Michael of the Mother of God. Today there is only one Prestonian in the Community while the other Sisters come from St. Annes, Lancaster, Kent, Somerset, Sri Lanka, County Clare and County Limerick. Prayer and contemplation knows no boundaries or cultures!

In recent years Preston Carmel has acted as host to other Carmelite communities who were being re-established to meet changing circumstances - and now they have returned to their own quiet or not-so-quiet life.

I must digress for a moment.

At the time that Preston Carmel was being established something extraordinary was happening in another part of Europe, something that is celebrated on this date - 13th May.

For on this date, in 1917, - just a couple of weeks or so after this Foundation - 3 young shepherd children — Lucia, Jacinta and Francisco received the first of a series of visions at Fatima.

Today on the Centenary of the first vision, Pope Francis is visiting Fatima and canonising two of the three children. The cause of the third child, - Lucia who became a Carmelite Sister is also under way.

Here is Preston our focus is more on the Annunciation for the titular dedication of this Monastery is 'Mater Dei', Mother of God.

Mary's vision was not about the state of the world; or dramatic images of the sun & the moon which both attract and distract people, but the simple vision of a woman and a child. The same vision that had been given to Ahaz through Isaiah: "The Lord himself, will give you a sign. It is this: the maiden is with child and will soon give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel."

To hear – you need to listen. Stillness, openness are needed to hear the word of God, to welcome the Word of God. Mary was able to hear the word spoken to her because her heart was still, not filled with many distractions. Mary could be called a contemplative. Mary heard the words, the invitation, but had to reflect upon them: At first she was deeply disturbed and asked herself "How can this come about, since I am a virgin?" Why should she be chosen among all women to be the mother of the Messiah?

The angel Gabriel assured her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High shall overshadow her. She was making way for God to do great things through her. And it was possible because she was listening and hearing the word of God.

Such is the life of a contemplative; lived predominantly in silence, in prayer, and contemplation - while holding the deep needs of the world in the heart and keeping them in the presence of God. The daily life of a Monastery is centred on the Eucharist and on the Liturgy of the Hours, a rhythm of prayer for all the needs of the world, in support of those who are working amongst the elderly, the sick, the young and so many others.

Pope John Paul II said: "Through your cloistered lives the sick are comforted, the needy assisted, hearts are reconciled and the poor have the Gospel preached to them."

The world today is quite different to what it was in 1917. And who knows what it will be in another 100 years? The poor are with us always. Social needs will never go away but the ways of addressing them changes. But the world and the Church today have as much need as ever for such prayer and

dedication – and always will have. 'No Man is an Island'. It is the Lord's plan that we share a common humanity and a common destiny; that the Lord pours down his blessings on bad and good alike, that our different gifts and talents are given not just for our own benefit but for the good of all. We are parts of one Body. The close connection between the contemplative Carmelite and all other members of the Church - priests, religious and lay - is part of the wonderful mystery of God, whose Son was born and came to live amongst us. There is an intimate bond between us all. May the life, prayer and work of all together Magnify the Lord!

Congratulations to Preston Carmel! Thank you for your long faithful witness. And thank you for your part in the life and work amongst the people of Preston and the Diocese of Lancaster. Ad multos annos! May God bless you today and always.

Canon Peter Draper