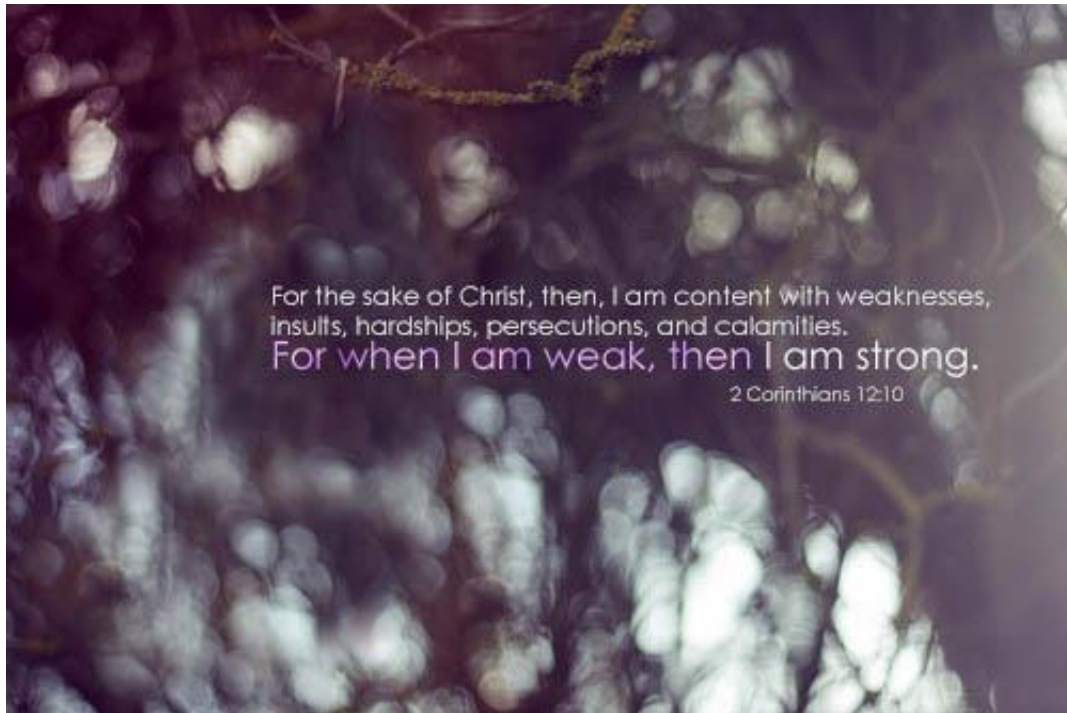


BECAUSE I WAS THE MOST IGNORANT

Readings: I Cor 1:26-31; Mt 5: 1-12



Yesterday was the 150th anniversary of the day when Bernadette first saw the beautiful Lady in this Grotto. Over the next few months we will be remembering various anniversaries of the individual apparitions and the events surrounding them.

Today, however, is the anniversary of a day when little or nothing happened! Bernadette was forbidden to go near Massabielle and her parents, no doubt, were hoping that she would forget the whole thing.

Tomorrow marks a day which seemed at first to be just as uneventful – until in the evening Bernadette went to the local church for confession. There she told Fr Pomian what had happened at the Grotto. He did not attach much importance to what he was hearing. But what struck him, apart from her obvious sincerity, was that she had spoken about a gust of wind.

The priest immediately recalled the passage about Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles, which said that the coming of the Holy Spirit was marked by a sound 'like the rush of a mighty wind'. He asked himself how this poor, uneducated, girl could possibly be echoing the story of Pentecost. He later said that some impulse from heaven prompted him to ask Bernadette for permission to speak about what she had said with the Parish Priest, Dean Peyramale¹.

There was another moment like that on March 25th. It happened with Dean Peyramale himself. That was the day that Bernadette told him the answer the Lady had given when she was asked her name: "I am the Immaculate Conception". At first he felt angry and told himself that 'Immaculate Conception' is not a name. (Although, as Bishop Perrier mentioned yesterday, the Angel Gabriel addressed Mary as 'full of grace', using that phrase as a name. The angel did not say 'Hail Mary', as we do, but 'Hail, full of grace')

But then Dean Peyramale realised that what was disturbing him was not anger but wonder; he was in the presence of something that he could not explain. Where could this little girl have heard the words 'Immaculate Conception', not in the French that would have been used in the church, but in her own dialect? How could she have invented such a thing, using words she did not even understand?²

Perhaps somewhere in the back of his mind he may also have felt that, if Our Lady wanted a chapel built and people to come in procession, she would have approached the Parish Priest directly!

But as it turned out, the very fact that Bernadette was young, uneducated, poor and sickly was what made her words so convincing.

Years later, it was reported that she used to insist that, "if she had been specially chosen to be the confidante and messenger of the holy Virgin, that was because of her littleness and her lowliness, so that all the honour would go to the holy Virgin and the glory of God". She said "If the holy Virgin chose me, it was because I was the most ignorant"³.

But the reason for her choice was not just to make the message more convincing – it was part of the message. The readings we have heard in this Mass tell us that this is always the pattern of God's choice. God chooses the weak to shame the strong and the foolish to shame the wise. God chooses those who are nothing at all to show up those who are everything. That was why Bernadette was chosen: "I know nothing", she said, "I am good for nothing".

That is the pattern of Lourdes ever since. In our pilgrimages we come with the sick, the fragile, those who long for many different kinds of healing. We place them at the heart of our pilgrimages as a visible sign of our faith in God's love for the weak.

When, in the Gospel we have just heard, Jesus teaches the central message about sharing his life, that is what he says: "How blessed are the poor in spirit; the kingdom of heaven is theirs".

Because she was uneducated, Bernadette was convincing. More importantly, because she was uneducated, because she had poor prospects in life, because she was sickly, she was able to receive the message more fully. She was able to understand it better than those who had education and wealth and power.

Those who are sick or weak or powerless, like Bernadette, can and do teach the rest of us something vital. Though we may, at least for part of our lives, enjoy comfort, good health, various kinds of success, they are not what life is about. As a line of Patrick Kavanagh says "Only they who fly home to God have flown at all"⁴. Our life is about our journey to God, not about what we think of as our achievements or our plans.

Bernadette learned well from the Lady she met 150 years ago. In the Gospel account of the Annunciation, Mary described herself: "I am the handmaid of the Lord". I am God's servant. When she prayed, she thanked God for looking on his servant in her lowliness, for scattering the proud hearted, for raising the lowly, for filling the starving.

Jesus tells us that those who mourn, those who hunger for what is right, those who are persecuted are blessed. We must do all we can to alleviate suffering, to bring peace and justice, but our hope involves more than that. The only hope that can fully satisfy us, the great hope which includes and surpasses all others, "can only be God"⁵.

That is what our life is about; and that is the core of the message of Lourdes. We place the sick and the dying at the centre because, in the end, their hope is exactly the same as ours – it can only be God.

Bernadette knew her own weakness. But she also knew that, when we are weak, then we are strong (2 Cor 12:10). Then we can be strong because we are more ready to believe that only God's strength, not ours, can save us. Bernadette lived her life by that hope, that longing, that wholehearted commitment.

12 February 2008

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1. LAURENTIN, R., *Bernadette of Lourdes*, Darton, Longman & Todd, London 1998, p,38.
 2. *Bernadette of Lourdes*, p.82.
 3. LAURENTIN, R.,*Bernadette Vous Parle II*, p. 301
 4. KAVANAGH, P., 'Beyond the Headlines', in *Patrick Kavanagh, the Complete Poems*, Newbridge 1972.
 5. BENEDICT XVI, *Spe Salvi*, 31.
 6. MOLONEY, J., *Bernadette Speaks*, Dublin 1979, p.45.