

ARCHBISHOP BERNARD LONGLEY

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**Your Eminence, my dear brother Bishops, dear fellow pilgrims:
I welcome you to Birmingham today for this unique gathering of men
and women of faith who are passionate about the Church's mission to
proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to the world.**

You represent the twenty-two dioceses of England and Wales and it is wonderful that we welcome the statue of Our Lady of Walsingham, brought to Birmingham by the Director of the National Shrine, Mgr Jonathan Armitage and Our Lady of the Taper, brought from the Welsh National Shrine at Cardigan by the Shrine Director Fr Philip Harries.

This ancient Welsh image of the Mother of God carries a lighted candle as a reminder that Jesus her Son is the light of the world. The recent tragic events in Tunisia have brought the darkness of an ideology of oppression and destruction into the heart of our own communities – a darkness that we know does not represent Islam and that has already been overcome by the light of Christ's truth and love. Communicating his message of reconciliation and peace is our task today. The memory of the London bombings ten years ago emphasises the importance of that task for the society in which we live and which we are called to serve.

When the idea of *Proclaim '15* first surfaced we were only a few months into the pontificate of Pope Francis. Throughout the time of his predecessor Pope Benedict the world and the Church herself had become more aware of many of the serious challenges we were facing in presenting the Good News in a credible way.

Every so often an investigative journalist will open up the issue of scandal and hypocrisy within the Church and the damage done to the Gospel and the Church's mission when we fail to speak and act with integrity. That is true for all disciples but it has a particular urgency when applied to those who have been entrusted with special responsibility for leadership within the Catholic Church. As evangelisers we are aware that the conduct and manner of our lives has the capacity to undermine whatever we may teach or preach.

The election of Pope Francis two years ago took place against this backdrop of a Church searching for new clarity about her identity and mission. The Holy Father's

ministry began during the Year of Faith, initiated by Pope Benedict as fitting way to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council. At the end of the Year of Faith Pope Francis presented his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium – The Joy of the Gospel* as a fruit of the Synod of Bishops which I attended in October 2012 on the theme of the New Evangelization. *Evangelii Gaudium* offers us the clearest indication of the Pope Francis' way of understanding the reality of the Church's life and mission today and it begins to answer some of the difficult questions that have emerged about the renewal of our commitment to evangelizing the world. It also highlights certain characteristics of authentic discipleship that I would like to explore this morning.

In this context I am particularly glad to welcome our ecumenical participants at *Proclaim '15*, highlighting the common concern that we have to shape missionary communities so as to bring Christ into a world that has grown unfamiliar with Christian faith and therefore suspicious of the values by which Christians try to live. It is important that Nicky Gumbel has joined us to share insights and experience from another part of the Christian family.

Part of the challenge of our effective witness to Christ is the attention and energy we devote to being disciples after his own heart – and his own ministry is always expressed in relationship to others, reflecting a deep interior commitment to dialogue and to outreach. These are both characteristics of Christian mission, the mission that Jesus received from his Father and the mission that he has entrusted to his disciples.

Dialogue: Whenever we gather together, encounter one another, engage in dialogue, esteem and love each other, then we are responding to and imaging the *imago Dei* – the image of God that is within each one of us severally and that is reflected in human beings in community. This desire to reach out and connect with others in dialogue and in service is a reflection of the divine nature at work within us.

We learn much about this aspect of our discipleship by looking carefully at Christ's relationships with others as the Gospels present them and by noting his own manner as a teacher who listened with respect, understanding and insight to others. As the best of teachers he entered into dialogue in a way that deepened faith, drawing out a response from the deepest level of a person's being, and calling for an active following of his way. In this connection we can think of the impact of his conversation with Peter and the apostles about his own identity – *Who do you say I am?* - with the Samaritan woman at the well, or with the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

This reflects one of the principle concerns of *Evangelii Gaudium* – to discover how to unfold the truths of our faith in a way that will draw our contemporaries towards

Christ and his teaching and into fruitful partnerships for the transformation of society.

Outreach: The second element of our discipleship is its capacity for outreach to others. In our own lives we value the infrastructure that guarantees personal safety, health and well-being are in place. But Christ asks us to be self-forgetful and to be concerned for those individuals and families for whom this kind of support and security are missing, for a variety of reasons.

As disciples we are charged to find practical ways of helping and encouraging each other in the support we can give, especially as Churches, to the homeless or those experiencing housing problems, to those lacking shelter, clothing and food or friendship – as well as asking why these circumstances are tolerated today.

In our discipleship, what is it that underpins our commitment to the poor and inspires the vision that draws us to come to their help? Disciples draw encouragement and fresh energy from the example and teaching of Jesus himself.

“Foxes have holes and the swallows their nests: but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” We don’t know the full import of that text – but it indicates some fellow feeling on the part of Jesus for those who are unsettled, either in a literal sense or in an interior sense. Both of these kinds of unsettledness are relevant to us. The experience of being homeless, uprooted from what is familiar, or lacking in lasting security can undermine inner peace.

Jesus had places to stay, but he was on the move for the three years of his mission – he travelled from village to village preaching the good news of the Kingdom. Only someone on the move can see others who have nowhere to lay their head, or who have no peace of mind. As his disciples there must be something of that alertness about us – to see and feel for the needs of others as a motive for reaching out and revealing the presence of Christ the Servant at the heart of our Christian communities.

Alongside his own experience, Jesus’ stories and teaching and many of his actions are also inspirational for us – they give us a definitive steer. The parables flow from his own personality and experience and some of them show his basic concern for those who are by the wayside.

The parable of the Good Samaritan is such a story. It is set in the hill country on the road descending from Jerusalem to Jericho, a place where the unwary traveller could be taken advantage of. Those who are already vulnerable are often open to further exploitation. At the centre of the parable is the man who is abandoned and desperate because he has been attacked and robbed. The Christian response is to find him shelter and a place of safety where his wounds could be treated and his

health restored. The parable also reminds us how easy it is for good people to walk by on the other side of the road, too scared to get involved, too preoccupied to respond, or simply ignorant about the need.

The Gospel underlines the intrinsic value of human life. For Catholic disciples this principle is expressed very comprehensively from the moment of conception until the moment of natural death. The Christian motive for standing beside people in their need is not only natural human compassion (although that often leads people to great selflessness and heroic virtue). We believe that in honouring other human beings for their own sake and value we also honour Jesus Christ whose image they reflect. We are moved by our belief that everyone is made in God's image and likeness, restored in Christ.

For this reason the Christian should be even more accountable than our brothers and sisters of other faiths or of none for any neglect we show to those in need. At the same time we can be motivated out of love for our Lord, especially when we recall that the Gospel identified his family at the outset as having to find shelter in a stable, and needing to leave home for its own safety.

In *Evangelii Nuntiandi* Pope Paul emphasised the value of a Christian discipleship that was open to connecting with others. *For the Church*, he wrote, *the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbour with limitless zeal. As we said recently to a group of lay people, "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." St. Peter expressed this well when he held up the example of a reverent and chaste life that wins over even without a word those who refuse to obey the word. It is therefore primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus - the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity.* (§41)

Pope Francis' vision in *Evangelii Gaudium* is of a Church that is fit for mission. He recognises that in the Western world we live in a society that has become unused to the sound of God's voice calling us to repentance and renewal. To overcome our blunted corporate conscience we need to take the risk of renewing our personal encounter with Christ.

Despite the discouragement and set-backs that we inevitably encounter as disciples, the joy of the Gospel is so profound that it underpins all our experience and remains a constant foundation for the lives and our mission to the world. We must try to avoid a false dualism that sees the Church and the world as totally separate – the state of the world is not external to the Church – it is the locus of

salvation, the focus of God's loving attention: *God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son.*

Quoting Pope Benedict, Pope Francis urges us in *Evangelii Gaudium* to reject “*the grey pragmatism of the daily life of the Church, in which all appears to proceed normally, while in reality faith is wearing down and degenerating into small-mindedness*” *A tomb psychology thus develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum.* (§83)

He also reflects on the renewal of the parish as the primary locus of evangelization and asks each parish community to be ready for dialogue and outreach - to have and to foster a desire for contact with the corporal and spiritual needs of those in the community.

Evangelii Gaudium's references to ecumenism are both challenging and encouraging. Pope Francis emphasises that the lack of unity among Christians harms the credibility of the Christian message of the Gospel. Peace among Christians is a contribution to the peace of the human family – we can offer a model of charity in circumstances where we differ from each other in fundamentals – our way of conduct with each other shows the reality of the peace of Christ that is entrusted to us.

Our conference today will be accompanied by the prayers of two great missionary spirits from the nineteenth century who knew and loved the Midlands where we gather. Blessed Dominic Barberi, the Italian missionary who came as a migrant to England to preach the Gospel in a new way and whose holiness of life prompted John Henry Newman, after long intellectual and spiritual discernment, to seek full communion with the Catholic Church. And Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman himself who served and was loved by the people of this city.

As we respond to the call to share and witness joyfully to our faith we walk in their footsteps today and we hear Cardinal Newman encouraging us in words by now familiar: *God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I never may know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next.*

Blessed Dominic Barberi, Blessed John Henry Newman, Our Lady of the Taper, Our Lady of Walsingham: Pray for us.