

Centenary of Consecration and re-opening of St Joseph's Maidenhead

25th May 2014

I would like to begin by thanking Fr Tom McGrath for inviting me to preach on this historic occasion. There may be something of a parable in the invitation and I hope you will be able to work this out as we go along.



100 years ago, 20th May 1914, the Maidenhead Advertiser carried the following front page report “Within the last few months Maidenhead has been provided with a new landmark, one that is prominent from almost any point of the town and its environs. It is the spire which surmounts the fine Gothic tower of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Cookham Road. If it is not pretentious, it is certainly imposing. The spire is the outward sign of the vigorous life and progress of the church it adorns; it is the culminating point of costly extensions to that sacred edifice, and it demonstrates the fact that the church is entering upon a new epoch - a church that has survived for many centuries in this town. The worshippers who

attend St. Joseph's are justly proud of their enlarged and improved church, as it stands today in its magnificent completeness.”

One hundred years later, here we are in this very church, here this morning to thank God - not just for this building but more especially for what He has done in our lives and in the lives of those who prayed in this church and have now gone before us.

100 years ago it was the Abbot of Douai Abbey, Abbot Lawrence Larkin who stood at this pulpit to deliver the sermon. Today it is another outsider, not a Benedictine monk but a member of St Joseph's Missionary Society, Mill Hill missionaries, who has the honour of addressing you. I dare to suggest that Abbot Larkin and I have at least one thing in common. He arrived in the diocese of Portsmouth after he and his community had been expelled from France in 1903. We the MHMs ended up in this same diocese after selling our large college at Mill Hill in 2005. We were looking for a new home and spent the best part of a year searching in the London area. We even considered a building where the Harry Potter film, 'The Prisoner of Azkaban', was shot. It was turned down as they would not allow us to install a lift. God works in mysterious ways - and so it was that our estate agents suggested a new property in Maidenhead that was only at foundation level. Before coming to Maidenhead with the then General Council of MHMs in 2005 to look at this building site on Cookham Rd. we had prayed that God would give us a sign - and it came for me when we asked the estate agent, who was accompanying us on our visit, where was the Catholic church in Maidenhead. “St Joseph's, she said “is three minutes' walk from here.” “St Joseph's? It is called St Joseph's?” we exclaimed! This was the sign we had been looking for (St Joseph is the Patron of MHM) and we went on to purchase the houses at Cookham Rd and Colby Gardens where 10 MHMs now live and which is the international HQ of the MHMs. I might add that another factor in our coming was the warm welcome we received from a certain parish priest of St Joseph's - for which I would like to thank him today publicly. Fr Tom McGrath has always extended a warm welcome to the Mill Hill missionaries and we will miss him when he moves on in September.

The Maidenhead Advertiser of 20th May 1914 goes on to add: “The Catholic Church of Maidenhead has a most interesting history. The original church in this town was begun 1269 but it quickly ran into problems as it did not have the necessary permission to continue building. The Archbishop of

Canterbury, subsequently Cardinal Kilwardby, took the case to Rome and the Pope finally settled the case and the chapel was opened for worship in 1324". I bet few of you knew that? From the time of the Dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII to about 1557 the chapel was without a priest.

When we enter Penal times, starting in 16th century, the Catholic religion was banned and it was a criminal offence to be a Catholic priest or to celebrate Mass. This continued until 1829 until the Catholic Emancipation act was passed and Catholics were again more or less free to worship.

Back to the Advertiser: "Formal Roman Catholic worship returned to Maidenhead in 1867. Amongst a group of wealthy Victorians to convert to Catholicism was, eldest son of William Wilberforce, the philanthropist and leader in the anti-slavery movement. Mr. Wilberforce came to reside in Maidenhead in 1867, making his home at Ives Place (where the present town hall and library are now situated). He re-named it St. Ives, opening his home for Roman Catholic services, the first of which was held in his study in August of that year. At the entrance of Ives Place stood the old Bull Inn, and owing to accommodation in Mr. Wilberforce's house being too small, a part of the Inn was adapted for divine service until a school with a chapel was built and opened at the corner of Bridge Street and Forlease Lane in 1871. This was made possible by the town's fourth Catholic priest, Fr Richard Davis, and the continuing generosity of William Wilberforce who donated the site and contributed to the costs."

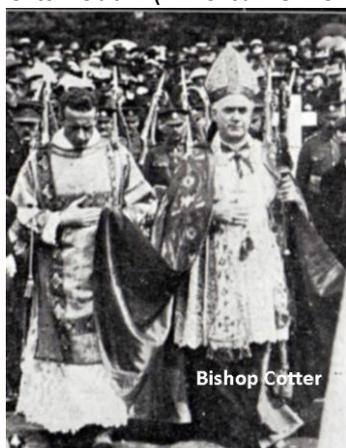


In 1882 the Rev. Father Scannell purchased the grounds in Cookham Road, in which now stood the school, Presbytery and the present church.

1877 the scheme for building the church was begun on the Feast of St Joseph and by 1884 the church was built - but only the nave was completed as there were only enough funds for this and the Parish would not wish to be in debt.



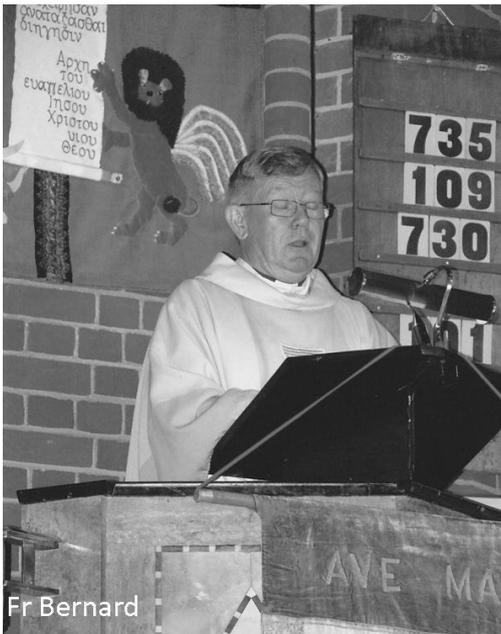
1914 saw the completion of the church thanks to a number of wealthy benefactors, most notably the Coleman Family (their name can be seen all around the church). The total cost of the newly completed church was nearly £5,000. The solemn opening of the church was celebrated 25th May 1914, when High Mass was sung at 11 o'clock by the Rt. Rev. W. T. Cotter, Bishop of Portsmouth. (Who came from Cloyne, in Co Cork, the same town as the Parish Priest, Fr Patrick Curtin and now Fr Tom. In fact so many priests from Cloyne came to work in the Diocese of Portsmouth that it was known as "Little Cloyne.")



As we celebrate the centenary of the consecration of our church we are in fact celebrating several different things. We celebrate the gift of this building that has been bequeathed to us by our Catholic ancestors and I can say, as an outsider, that the parish are keeping it in a worthy fashion as it would have been expected from those same ancestors.

I suppose chiefly today we celebrate the parish community – you who make up the People of God here in Maidenhead. We are celebrating the many peoples from many parts of the world who have come through the doors of this church. For many of them it has been a home; it has been a place of spiritual consolation and a deepening of their Christian faith. You have come here to celebrate your important family events: Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation, Confession, Marriages and you have come here to say goodbye to your loved ones who have passed away. You will all, I'm sure, have your memories, happy and sad.

In the Exhibition in the Hall you will see some of the stories of the community (and the Parish School) and also some of the story of the buildings and I hope that you can avail yourself of the opportunity of looking at it.



Fr Bernard

Even if it is right and proper for us to look back today we are not here in some kind of museum where we admire past deeds. We need to look to the future. The same Jesus Christ who called our ancestors who came here to pray is calling us today. But to what? Abbot Larkin, in his homily 100 years ago pointed to two obstacles preventing the Catholic community developing in England: prejudice and indifference. In today's First Reading from Acts we see how God asks those first followers of Jesus to move out of Jerusalem "Paul went to a Samaritan town and proclaimed Christ to them." "When the apostles heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God they sent Peter and John to them and they prayed for the Samaritans to receive the Holy Spirit." This is quite extraordinary. The apostles were in Jerusalem and were told to go to Samaria. You will remember that during Jesus public ministry he always had difficulties in Samaria. Jews and Samaritans hated each other, the Jews regarding the Samaritans as heretics. So what is happening? Under the

influence of the Holy Spirit those first Christians are setting aside their fears and prejudices and going out to those whom they previously considered their enemies.

Today under the powerful leadership of Pope Francis, Jesus is calling on us today to move out into the modern Samaria – places we would prefer to avoid going to - to people with whom we would not normally associate. When in Cameroon as a missionary I worked in the North in an area that had over 50 different ethnic groups/tribes. My biggest challenge as a missionary was not the snakes that got into the house or bad roads or malaria but how to bring so many diverse people together. I used to ask the young students at the university where I was chaplain to draw a circle and write in the middle of that circle the names of their friends, people they would eat and drink and go out with and marry. Then, on the outside of the circle to write down the names of those they would not eat with or go out with or marry. It was very interesting, especially when I asked why? Inside the circle were the names of their friends - those of same tribe and religion. Outside - the others. We are today still wary and sometimes afraid of what is different, of people with a different skin colour to us, accent, eating habits, religion, voting patterns.

At first James and Peter felt very much like us and resisted allowing anyone into the circle unless they first became Jews i.e. acted and believed like them. Paul was the first to realise that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Jesus, was asking them to enlarge the circle and admit non-Jews into the Church. And so when Peter goes to Samaria in our reading this is Headline News, it's a big story. He is breaking new ground. Pope Francis in the Joy of the Gospel, says this: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea but the encounter with a Person who gives life a new horizon." He goes on to say that because of our Baptism "all the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples. "Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus." He then invites us to look at the first Christians who once they had encountered Jesus went forth to proclaim him joyfully. "We have found the Messiah". The Samaritan woman became a missionary after meeting Jesus at the well and because of her, the whole village believed and were baptised. And the same was true for St Paul at his conversion "he immediately proclaimed Jesus." We don't do this necessarily by distributing tracts or standing in Nicholsons shopping centre with a hailer. Pope Francis invites us to allow the Holy Spirit to move in us and use whatever opportunities come out way - a conversation with someone at a funeral or in the pub, on the occasion of a christening or wedding, when someone talks to you about their problems, by offering to pray for someone in difficulties. If we wish to honour the legacy of the past and honour those who had this Church built and prayed here, then we must go out, taking the Joy of the Gospel to those

around us. Sometimes this only requires that we live in hope and let this show. Do not look like people who are coming back from a funeral! – says Pope Francis.

I would like to end with the words of Pope Francis. After explaining that all baptised people are missionaries, sent out in God's name he says "mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. When we stand before Christ crucified, we see the depth of his love which sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realise that Jesus' gaze, burns with love and expands to embrace all his people.

Moved by his example, we want to enter fully into the fabric of society, sharing the lives of all, listening to their concerns, helping them materially and spiritually in their needs, rejoicing with those who rejoice, weeping with those who weep, arm in arm with others, we are committed to building a new world. But we do this not from a sense of obligation, nor as a burdensome duty, but as a result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives."

This is how we move forward as Christ's followers into the next 100 years. May the Spirit that entered those first followers of Jesus fill us, fill our sails, as we go where he would lead us.