

HOMILY FOR THE CELEBRATION OF VESPERS
BEGINNING THE CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS OF
ARCHDIOCESE OF CARDIFF
6 FEBRUARY 2016
ST DAVID'S CATHEDRAL CARDIFF
ARCHBISHOP GEORGE STACK

The year 2016 marks the centenary of many important events, not least the conflicts associated with the First World War. This year we commemorate the Battle of Verdun, the Somme offensive and the Battle of Jutland. The Pope in those years was Benedict XV who described the war as *“the suicide of civilised Europe”*. He spent his pontificate negotiating with the warring nations and was known as *“the Pope of Peace”*. It was partly by his inspiration that the famous Christmas truce was held in 1914.

During all this turmoil, Benedict had to care for the well being of the Church too. One issue on his desk was the reorganisation of the Catholic Church in Wales. The boundaries of 1850 were no longer satisfactory. Recognising the growing importance of Cardiff as a city, the decision was made to replace the original Diocese of Newport, and create the Archdiocese of Cardiff. The Suffragan See was to be the Diocese of Menevia, covering the rest of Wales. All these arrangements were contained in the Papal Bull *“Celtica Cambrensis”* dated 7th February 1916.

The establishment of this Diocese was a tribute to those who had sacrificed themselves in serving the scattered groups of Catholics up and down the valleys in the hidden years of the 17th and 18th centuries. The Jesuits and the Franciscans, the Rosminians and the Benedictines, together with Irish priests who followed their emigrant people to the steel works and coal mines. The religious orders of women who dedicated their lives to teaching and care of

the poor came too. The Daughters of the Holy Spirit, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Annecy and the Daughters of Charity have honoured places in the life of this Diocese. Most Dioceses are satisfied with one Cathedral and one Cathedral Chapter. Cardiff was blessed with two of each – the Abbey Church at Belmont and St. David’s Cathedral here in Cardiff. This was in recognition of the historic connections and debt owed to the Benedictines in this part of the world. The presence of the Abbot and Community of Belmont singing Vespers to open our Centenary year acknowledges the debt we owe them.

The reading we have just heard from the Old Testament Book of Nehemiah is a sort of backdrop against which I see this centenary. It describes events, which took place about 500 years before the time of Jesus. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The Temple razed to the ground. The people of Israel had been taken off to slavery for the second time in their history, this time to Babylon – modern day Iraq. (There is little new in the Middle East refugee crises). In the midst of all this loss, their prophets told them to stay faithful to their belief in God. He would not abandon them. He would one day bring them back to their homeland. And here in our reading the promise is fulfilled. They are back in Jerusalem; the new Temple is being built. You can see the remains of it at the so-called ‘Wailing Wall’ at which people still pray today. The walls of the city are rising. Ezra the priest tells the people they can practice their religion properly again. We heard in the reading *“Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people”* and led them in prayer.

It is the end of the reading, which I love. Nehemiah and Ezra told the people not to weep. Some were weeping for joy at being back in Jerusalem for the rebuilding of the Temple and the city. Others were weeping in sorrow for what had been destroyed and what they had lost. And so loud was the weeping that they couldn’t tell the difference between those who were happy and those who were sad.

Is it too much to say that both in the Church and in society at large tears of joy at what is new are often mingled with tears of sadness at what has been lost? If these walls could only speak, what would they say? They would speak of the industrialisation of the 19th century when the coalmines and the steel works of the valleys were the powerhouse of Europe. They would speak of the First World War, and the Second, and the Cold War of the 1960's and the fall of the Berlin Wall; of the fall of communism in the West and the role Pope John Paul II played. They would speak the turmoil in the coal industry in the 1970's and in the steel industry even to this present day. Of the explosion of Information Technology, of the sexual revolution and the fragmentation of family life with all the problems that brings.

In the churches we would regret the rise of secularism and relativism, which says faith in God, is a private matter. Believe what you like as long as your beliefs do not impinge on public policy. On the other hand, a rise in fundamentalism, which wraps political messages in religious language and forces it onto the public agenda in sometimes violent ways. Some people cry for joy at what has been achieved. Others cry in sadness for what has been lost. And sometimes the same person cries with both those emotions in their hearts. Each of us is a microcosm of old and new.

One of the reasons for inviting our civic dignitaries and those in public service to this opening celebration of our Diocesan centenary is to thank you for the service you offer to our city and our country in times of joy and in times of sorrow. Another is to assure you that the Christian Churches and the different faith communities are dedicated, as you are, to the Common Good. There may be times when we use different language, and ways of looking at life might differ, but the commitment we all have to social cohesion must be an absolute priority for us all.

In the Rule of Life compiled by St. Benedict for his monks 1500 years ago, the Abbot is told he must ensure that *"...the strong must always have something to*

strive for, but the weak must not be crushed". There is strength and weakness in each human person, in every institution, in every country. Society is as strong as its weakest link. During this Vespers and the Centenary we will pray and re-dedicate ourselves that *"...the strong may have something for which to strive and that the weak may not be crushed"*.
