

## **Lourdes Grotto Mass**

**26 August 2019**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, dear fellow Pilgrims,

What a privilege it is for us to be gathered here at the Grotto, in this Year of St. Bernadette. On this very site there was a series of encounters between Our Blessed Lady and the young Bernadette. Mary reached out to a young, frail, uneducated girl who was collecting firewood for her family who had fallen on hard times. In all, Our Lady appeared to Bernadette eighteen times in the niche above this grotto.

Mary's reaching out to Bernadette reflects the way in which God has reached out to us and to all humanity as we heard in the first reading from the Letter to the Galatians. "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born a subject of the Law, to redeem the subjects of the Law and to enable us to be adopted as sons and daughters."

It was as subjects of the Law that Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem, in accordance with the Law of Moses, to present him to the Lord. What amazing encounters Joseph and Mary with the baby, Jesus, had there, first with Simeon, an upright and devout man, and then with the eighty-four-year-old Anna who never left the Temple serving God night and day with fasting and prayer.

Prompted by the Spirit, Simeon took Jesus in his arms and pronounced him to be the light of the nations and the glory of God's people, Israel. Anna, too,

spoke about Jesus to all who looked forward to the deliverance of Jerusalem.

For Simeon and for Anna there was that pattern of reaching out and encountering the divine and then moving on to witness to God's presence and action in our world.

Naturally, in this holy place, I spoke first about the mother of Jesus and her encounter with Bernadette here, and then about Simeon and Anna and their encounter in the Temple with Jesus, the Saviour of the world.

What about each one of us and especially those of us who are sick and those of us supporting those who are sick and our children? With what courage you have travelled to Lourdes and got up early this morning to be here for the grotto Mass. What about you who are leaders and organisers, musicians? What about you, dear brother bishops and priests and deacons, and all of us fellow pilgrims?

This Mass is a moment to open our hearts to Mary and ask her prayers that we may truly encounter her Son and his Spirit that we may recognise that we are sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, who can reach out to God our Father.

What a moment of grace this can be, a moment of encounter perhaps at the grotto this morning or at some other time on our pilgrimage. These are precious moments, first to reach out to Christ and his Blessed Mother, and then to one another, in conversation and friendship, making a special point of reaching out to people who are neglected and ignored by the outside world.

This way of encounter, this culture of encounter, is very close to the heart of our Holy Father, Pope Francis. Pope Francis sees the way we encounter one another as the work of Jesus, not just seeing but looking, not just hearing but listening, not just passing people by but stopping with them, not just saying “what a shame, poor people” but allowing ourselves to be moved with compassion, and then to draw near, to make contact and to speak.

Perhaps, like Bernadette, we may feel shy and insignificant but, even if our faith is faltering, it is an encounter with Jesus, and we are called to do what Jesus does: encounter others.

At the back of the grotto is the spring of water which Our Lady told Bernadette to look for. May our Mass together refresh and enliven our faith in Jesus, and may the prayers of Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Bernadette help us to put that faith into action in our loving encounter with one another and with our world. Amen.

**+Peter Doyle**

**Bishop of Northampton**