

MASS MARKING EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL
ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL EDINBURGH
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN
SUNDAY 17TH AUGUST 2008

INTRODUCTION:

May I renew my very warm welcome to you all gathered here this morning to celebrate with us in Edinburgh and thanking God at this Mass for the Edinburgh International Festival and the many associated festivals on this occasion.

I have already welcomed our first citizen, the Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh, the Rt. Hon. George Grubb along with his wife Elizabeth and the many councillors and their families and friends along with those many other officials, especially the High Constables of Edinburgh, who sustain the work of our City at this time.

Obviously also a very warm welcome is extended not only to our own parishioners of the Cathedral, the City and our Archdiocese but the very many guests to our City from home and overseas at this time.

Our celebrations in Edinburgh mark the third major festival which I have enjoyed over our summer months and I want to say some words about each one of them.

CELEBRATIONS IN LOURDES FRANCE:

My first festival was really an annual one which I attend but this year it was rather special. The festival took place in Lourdes France and this year it marked the 150th anniversary of the apparitions of Our Blessed Lady to St Bernadette in that grotto in a little country village called Lourdes in the south of France.

Pilgrimages have continued to Lourdes since those first apparitions 150 years ago in 1858 with increasing numbers coming from all over the world.

There is a normal pattern to the pilgrimage dictated by the words of the Virgin Mary herself to Bernadette: "Tell the priests....organise pilgrimages here.....bathe in the waters.....do prayer and penance!"

You might think that there is not much in those words to attract countless thousands of people each year to Lourdes but nevertheless those pilgrimages have continued bringing ever increasing numbers to pray and do penance, to go in procession, to bathe in the waters!

One event which gave me and our pilgrims from Edinburgh very great joy was Mass in the vast underground Basilica on Sunday 13th July of this year. As a Cardinal Archbishop I was principal celebrant with ten bishops concelebrating Mass with me along with about 400 priests – and gathered into the packed underground Basilica where approximately 100,000 people. It was a great moment of prayer and praise – but what struck me particularly were the moments of silence, particularly after the proclamation of the Word of God and during that time of private prayer after communion. The silence invariably continued at the simple grotto in the rock face where Mary appeared to Bernadette – a special place for private prayer.

CELEBRATIONS IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA:

The next great festival which I attended was the World Youth Day in Sydney Australia led by Pope Benedict XVI.

Again there were very many public celebrations both before and after the arrival of Pope Benedict XVI – particularly the days which pilgrims from all over the world spent in various parishes of the diocese around Sydney itself; and the catecheses and instruction which continued for the youth, led by bishops and priests from all over the world.

However the focal point of the celebrations was the vigil and Mass with Pope Benedict XVI on the evening of Saturday 19th July continuing into the morning of Sunday 20th July.

The vigil of prayer and the Mass itself were led by the Pope assisted by 26 cardinals, over 500 bishops and a vast congregation of young people numbering almost 500,000.

For all the vocal prayer and wonderful singing which took place again I am sure it was the prolonged periods of silence which impressed everyone taking part in the event. The periods of silent prayer were again particularly noticed during the Mass on the Sunday morning when despite the vast crowds there was almost silence which could be cut with a knife after the readings of scripture and reception of holy communion.

CELEBRATIONS IN EDINBURGH:

Having celebrated those two great festivals abroad I now think of our Edinburgh International Festival and the other celebrations associated with it taking place at this present time in our Capital City.

Like many of you I have shared in uplifting concerts; enthralling drama; much appreciated art; the great variety of the fringe; and what one can simply describe as the “companionship of the crowd” all over our city, with one area in particular which I enjoy – the Royal Mile.

All of this has given us a greater appreciation of the beauty of art; of the ways in which people can reach out to a deeper understanding of what beauty is; they can have a greater feeling of fellowship with one another; and hopefully they can find something more of the place of God in all that is continuing around them.

I am sure however that as in Lourdes France and in Sydney Australia – what is perhaps of more importance in the midst of so much sound is the appreciation of periods of silence.

These times of silence can occur in various places: In the midst of a beautiful piece of music; when a pause occurs in a dramatic presentation; immediately before the lone piper plays in the midst of the massed pipes and drums on the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle; and in so many other private and recollected moments. As at Lourdes and Sydney, these times for reflection, these moments of silence, are much appreciated and well observed!

SCRIPTURAL APPLICATION:

But perhaps a reading of today’s Gospel can help us put things in perspective, to try to understand what is really important. In today’s Gospel reading we are told of a dialogue which the Canaanite woman worried about her demented daughter had with Jesus. The woman begins by shouting at Jesus: “Sir, son of David, take pity on me. My daughter is demented by a devil”. And then we are told of Jesus himself: “**He answered her not a word**”.

Obviously that silence too was deeply significant. It gave the woman herself time to think; it helped the disciples of Jesus and their response; and eventually Jesus spoke – his words leading to the cure of the daughter of the woman because of the great faith of the woman herself. And the short extract finishes with some very simple words: “From that moment her daughter was well again!”

CONCLUSION:

Over the past weeks perhaps each one of us from time to time has appreciated the value of silence. Perhaps it was when in the midst of our own rejoicing we heard of the worries in Asia and Europe with regard to Russia and Georgia; perhaps when it was realised the increasing cost of living in our country with a stark reality presented on the front page of one of our national newspapers regarding how the price of an egg has soared in one year from 15p to 22p; perhaps it was when we realised that there was a death of a local soldier from Penicuik in Afghanistan; and so on.

Perhaps each one of us has appreciated the value of silence in our lives – those lives which are becoming ever increasingly busier and noisier. Again a statistic – just a few days ago we were told of the frightening numbers of hours we spend involved with the media and that the use of mobile phones has double over the past few years.

Rejoicing in our Festival and the many other associated festivals taking place in our City at this time – we thank God for the wonders of the performing arts and those involved in them presenting us with so much enjoyment.

However in the midst of our noisy rejoicing and our ever increasing chatter perhaps also we will appreciate evermore the value of those periods of silence which are so important in our lives – perhaps also appreciating more and more the value of our silences with God which is what we call prayer.