

Ampleforth
Blessing of Alban Roe House
19 March 2024
Feast of St Joseph

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of St Joseph. Today we mark the blessing of Alban Roe House.

I thank Fr Abbot and the community for their invitation to me to take part in these ceremonies. For me, they bring back happy memories and joyfully affirm our faith today.

I recall so well bringing a group of sixth-form students here, from Wigan in 1973. We stayed at The Grange, and very smart it was too. For the youngsters, it was an eye-opener. Some had never been away from Wigan, never experienced the pitch black of night without street lights, never sensed the spirit of prayer of the monastic Divine Office. Nor, more importantly, had some ever experienced the unconditional welcome they received from this community. It was also the first time I met Abbot Hume, later to be a great influence in my life.

I have read the account of the development of the Ampleforth Preparatory School in the Junior House with great interest, with the courageous decisions it involved, and of the development of the facility into Alban Roe House. It will indeed greatly enhance the outreach of the Monastery, especially to today's young people. I pray that the flow of youngsters to this new centre will become a flood, enabling many, many people to share the

experience of my small group all those years ago. In these days we speak much about a Church of deeper communion and mission. Alban Roe House is surely a fine expression of these aspirations being put into practice.

But now we should turn to St Joseph. In the Sacred Scriptures, little is to be found about him. Yet that little is more than enough. He is more eloquent in his actions than many words could ever be. We learned from the Gospel today three qualities of St Joseph which we can seek to emulate, especially us men.

First, Joseph is described as 'a man of honour', a man not willing to allow Mary to be subject to scorn or derision. Not only does he clearly understand the dignity of Mary but he is also very aware that his society was more than ready to mock and belittle those of whom it does not approve. But not for Joseph. He was willing to stand for something better. He was obstinate in upholding the dignity of others even in the face of being criticised or marginalised. Can we do the same?

Secondly, we hear in the Gospel that he was sensitive and attentive to the message of the Angel, to an inner prompting, that overturned the decision he had already taken. This quiet man had a hidden depth. His soul was attentive to God. He listened. He paid heed. He was obedient to that call. Clearly, Joseph did not think of himself as a 'self-made man'. In him, there was no sense of his own achievement. Rather he recognised that all he had been given had come from God and was best used for God's purpose. Thus grew in him a realisation of the role he had been called to play in the life of Mary and Jesus, bringing the true light

of God into the world, the one 'who is to save his people from their sins'.

In these two qualities lie enfolded a third. Joseph is a man who took special care to be protective of the vulnerable. Mary and Jesus were placed under his protective care. So too, here at Ampleforth, there is a great care now exercised for the protection of the young and vulnerable. But also, we remember, of the elderly and dying members of this community. Joseph, the patron of a happy death, will stay close to those who here embark on their final journey to heaven, with their monastic brethren to support them. Indeed, Joseph is close to every family that strives to accompany their loved ones in death, with a true dignity in dying, a phrase so misused today.

May I suggest that this Feast Day is such a suitable moment for the blessing of this new House, in which visitors will learn about the God-given dignity of their lives; in which they will grow in the deep spirit of listening for the prompting of God in their lives and the willingness to follow God's call; and in which they will be welcomed into a safe and life-enhancing environment. May St Joseph always give his blessing and protection to this new venture.

But there is another patron of this project whom we must not neglect: St Alban Roe. He's such an attractive character! Dismissed from the seminary and his desire to be a priest – who knows the reasons behind that! – he joined the Benedictine community in Lorraine and was professed in 1614. Then, in 1618 he came to England as a missionary priest where his life took a

new turn - as a prison inmate. He was five years in New Prison in Maiden Lane in London; then released and exiled only to return here in obedience to his missionary calling. He was arrested again to spend 17 years in Fleet Prison. Who knows, maybe his monastic training stood him in good stead through those long years. But they were not wasted. He was something of a card-sharp, constantly playing cards with other prisoners, and using that contact to urge them to pray with him, to trust in the Lord. In January 1642 the inevitable happened: he was brought to trial and condemned to the cruel death of being hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn. But his last words are just wonderful: 'I wish I had a thousand lives. I would sacrifice them all for such a great cause!' He too will be a great patron for this newly refurbished House which bears his name.

The opening prayer at our Mass today included a lovely phrase: that 'We may constantly watch over the unfolding of the mysteries of our salvation'. May Alban Roe House be a place where the invitation and treasures of our salvation unfold in the lives of all its visitors. This we pray through Christ Our Lord. Amen.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster