

St. Joseph Day 2009, Centenary of our arrival in Droitwich

- 1-** 100 yrs ago first the first Betharram priests arrived here. They came because of expulsion of religious from France in 1903. Briefly they stopped in Belgium on the way. They spent a couple of years at St. Peter's Leamington, then Immaculate Conception Bicester, then with the Poor Clares at Woodchester. Their English was not very good when they arrived but they made the best of it. The first priests were all French (Costedoat, Dospital, Seyres), and Droitwich was very different from the Béarn region they left behind.
- 2-** At first they may have thought their sojourn would be temporary. But they put down roots. Archbishop Ilesley took a liking to these new religious and gave them a mandate in Droitwich: start a new parish and a new school. After many years one of the bishop's nephew's joined the family of Betharram (Fr. Philip Ilesley) and worked many years at Droitwich before becoming a parish priest on the Island of Guernsey. Through the hard work of the first pioneers, those who followed them like Willie Lyth, Alec Biggart and their successors, a parish and school were built up.
- 3-** Droitwich town has changed in 100 years. It even changed greatly in my lifetime. As a teenager I knew Droitwich with its open air Lido, cinema, busy railway station and weekly market. I remember too the serious rivalry with the Divine Word College at Hadzor. We talk about bad feeling between Premiership football teams today but it was nothing compared to the football matches between Sacred Heart College and St. Richard's years ago! Yet in spite of all that our very first English priest was buried in the Divine Word graveyard. Fr. Eric Basey died very young, before we had a cemetery at Droitwich and he was interred at St. Richards.
- 4-** Tonight is feast of St. Joseph. A patron of our Congregation from the beginning. We always had a tradition of having at least one house in each province named after St. Joseph. He is also the traditional patron of happy death. St. Joseph is also confirmation saint. And my contention for many years has been that he has been treated unjustly by artists & sculptors! He is so often portrayed as a very passive figure, without much personality.
- 5-** My contention: St. Joseph was a man of courage & faith, a passionate man, a man of action & resourcefulness. He listened to his dreams & acted on them. Loved Mary with a passionate courageous love. It was not a passive act to adopt the child Jesus and give him his own family name. He was teacher of the child. He gave his whole future for Mary and Jesus. WE hear tonight the words of Jesus from the last supper: 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends'. We always suppose that Jesus was speaking about himself, and that is certainly possible. But perhaps he was also thinking of the man who brought him up? The man who loved him as a child and protected him?
- 6-** Joseph's whole life upturned upside down after the birth of Jesus. The whole family fled to Egypt. Into a strange land, a land of exile, where they did not know the language. They had no legal right to be there. No work permit.
- 7-** With a stubborn faith Joseph got on with the business of supporting family. Making his way. Protecting the weak and the vulnerable.
- 8-** The whole western church today is like St. Joseph. It is as though we are in exile in Egypt not quite knowing language. We do not quite know how to communicate with the atheists and agnostics around us. Some even question our right to be here. It is a bit confusing in this strange land.
- 9-** What did Joseph do? He learnt a new language .. learned new way building friendships .. he talked to a different kind of neighbour. I find it significant that Jesus grew up far more aware of different cultures than most of his Jewish contemporaries.
- 10-** So Joseph can be a model for our times ... for our church .. for our Congregation of Betharram.. We have to learn new language .. new ways of building community .. new ways to talk to our neighbours..
- 11-** This takes time .. patience .. persistence and fidelity. Tonight we thank God for the dogged persistence of the first pioneers who did just that and we ask that we their successors may be blessed with the same grace.