

**EVENSONG – ORIEL COLLEGE**  
**21 FEBRUARY 2022**

***The Lord says this: I am going to look after my flock myself and keep all of it in view.***

I am very grateful to the Provost and the College Chaplain for tonight's opportunity to come and pray with you on the birthday of St John Henry Newman – his two hundred and twenty-first birthday. Cardinal Newman was just twenty-one when he was elected a Fellow of Oriel in April 1822 and his academic and spiritual life was shaped by his close association with this college and its members until his withdrawal to Littlemore in 1842.

The Sisters of the Spiritual Family *Das Werk*, who are happily with us tonight, have established their home and apostolate at Newman's College in Littlemore. With their charism of hospitality they welcome pilgrims and visitors, enabling them to experience what Cardinal Newman called *a place of retirement for myself* while fulfilling his wish and sustaining his custom: *so did I offer it to others.*

When St John Henry was appointed Vicar of St Mary's University Church in 1828 he also became responsible for the benefice of Littlemore. This was a pastoral duty which he clearly took very seriously, overseeing the building of the new parish church in 1835 alongside the provision of the school in 1838. His pastoral work among the local community at Littlemore foreshadowed his concern many years later to alleviate poverty and spiritual want in industrial Birmingham.

We can still hear his affectionate regard for Littlemore and its pivotal role in the development of his own faith and priestly ministry. He wrote of Littlemore: *there it has been, that I have both been taught my way and received an answer to my prayers...*

That way eventually lead him to find St Philip Neri in Rome and under the saint's inspiration to found the first Oratory in England. Some of the successors of that foundation are also with us tonight. It is good to recall that the Provost of the Oxford Oratory, Fr Nicholas, has very recently preached in this chapel on another celebrated influence on Cardinal Newman, St Francis de Sales – from whose writings the famous motto *Cor ad cor loquitur* derives.

Given his formidable intellect it strikes me as significant that Cardinal Newman did not choose *mens ad mentem loquitur*. Faith searches for meaning – *fides quaerens intellectum* - but it communicates itself through the grace and gift of friendship and it thrives in a social, collegial or ecclesial setting. In St John's Gospel Jesus says: *I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.*

Cardinal Newman's gift for friendship is well known. It flourished here at Oriel, where Edward Pusey was among his closest companions, and, despite the pain of separation from many old friends, it remained central to his life as a Roman Catholic. That sense of community – of family - drove his ambition to establish the community at Littlemore. It was also among the qualities that attracted him to St Philip Neri, the founder of the Congregation of the Oratory in Rome.

Divine and human friendship are connected and intertwine in the lives of each one of us – and this is powerfully illustrated in the experience of St John Henry. With an integrity and determination that never strayed from the path of truth he endeavoured with St Paul to speak the truth in love at all times.

In a sermon called *Love of Relations and Friends* – and preached on the Feast of St John the Evangelist – St John Henry said:

*...with our Saviour's pattern before me...the best preparation for loving the world, and loving it duly and wisely, is to cultivate an intimate friendship and affection towards those who are immediately about us...We are to begin with loving our friends about us, and gradually to enlarge the circle of our affections, till it reaches all Christians, and then all men...*

*By trying to love our relations and friends, by submitting to their wishes, though contrary to our own, by bearing their infirmities, by overcoming their occasional waywardness by kindness, by dwelling on their excellences, and trying to copy them, thus it is that we form in our hearts that root of charity, which, though small at first, may, like a mustard seed, at last overshadow the earth.*

It has been suggested that St John Henry's loss of friends upon his conversion to Catholicism inspired and enlivened his spiritual direction of others, because he understood friendship not only as a gift but also as a source of healing. In this he was able to connect with all manner of people, irrespective of their background or abilities.

On the morning after his death the Birmingham Daily Post carried this remarkable tribute: *Thousands of Dr Newman's readers felt that they knew him so intimately, and that he had such an intimate knowledge of them, that to meet him would be like meeting an old friend. And even for those who saw him only occasionally there was a charm in his personal presence, in his spirit, in the brightness and felicity of his conversation, in his affectionateness, that confirmed the impression produced by his writings.*

The Cardinal's pastoral concern for others extended well beyond his direct contact through visiting and preaching. The many volumes of his letters testify to the concern that he carried with him wherever he travelled or from wherever he settled.

In a letter written from Switzerland to Marieanne Bowden we see the tenderness of his pastor's heart – as we celebrate his birthday tonight we can also each take these words to heart:

*...put yourself into the hands of your loving Father and Redeemer who knows you and loves you better than you know or love yourself. He has appointed every action of your life. He created you, sustains you, and has marked down the very way and hour when He will take you to Himself. He knows all your thoughts, and feels for you in all your sadness more than any creature can feel, and accepts and makes note of your prayers even before you make them. He will never fail you - and He will give you what is best for you. And though He tries you, and seems to withdraw Himself from you and afflicts you, still trust in Him, for at length you will see how good and gracious He is, and how well He will provide for you...Be courageous and generous, and give Him your heart, and you will never repent of the sacrifice.*

St John Henry Newman.....Pray for us.