

## Reflection: Feast of Our Lady of Walsingham, transferred. 25 September 2020.



For your average yeoman, going on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the Eleventh Century would have been almost out of the question, for two main reasons. One: the sheer logistics of such a voyage for the average person, the money required and the sheer difficulty of securing safe passage, not to mention all the language and cultural barriers; and, Two: the Holy Land had been conquered by the Muslims in AD 636. Although, for three hundred years or so, things had not been too bad, and getting to the Holy Land had been a possibility, if you could afford it and had faith, in AD 969, the hardliner *Fatimids* had taken over, and Caliph Al-Haikim had even ordered the destruction of the Christian Churches in Jerusalem in AD 1009, including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. By AD 1030, things had eased up a bit and the churches were allowed to be rebuilt under Caliph Ali az-Zahir. However, just as things were getting back to normal, the Great Schism happened in AD 1054. This made everything even more complex, and by AD 1095, at the Council of Clermont, Pope Urban II was calling for the first Great Crusade. Pilgrimage was therefore a hugely difficult prospect. Then again, nothing has ever been that stable or safe in the Middle East! *But back to Walsingham...*



In the midst of all this, in AD 1061 five years before the Norman Invasion, in a backwater village, on the bleak North-West coast of Norfolk, Our Lady appeared in three visions to a Saxon noblewoman, Richeldis, and asked that a copy of the Holy Family's house at Nazareth be built. This was one of the earliest Marian apparitions. Clearly, it was at a time when a renewal of faith, hope and love was needed, which seems to be the case with all Marian apparitions. Our Lady promised that, *"Whoever seeks my help there will not go away empty-handed."* The Lady Richeldis then began the construction of the Holy House. *"According to tradition, there were early construction problems. One night, Richeldis heard singing and went out to her garden where she found that the little house had been completed about two hundred yards from the site of the original construction. Richeldis saw what she took to be angels leaving the now completed building."* The original Holy House was a simple wooden structure measuring approximately 24 ft. by 13 ft., with four small turrets and a central tower. The 'Holy House' was later encased in stone to protect it from the elements" This construction of a replica of Nazareth began what was to become one of the major centres of pilgrimage in the Europe of the Middle Ages. No longer did one need to travel to the Holy Land in order to achieve a sense of union with the Incarnation, in Walsingham the Holy Land came to England. For nearly five hundred years, Walsingham shone out as a beacon, witnessing to the truth of the Incarnation, until its maniacal, and demonic destruction by King Henry VIII, who, if not consciously, was aping the iconoclastic Caliph Al-Haikim's wanton destruction of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.



What is it about a place like Walsingham that makes it so special? Little Walsingham is a sort of nowhere backwater, even today. Like Nazareth, it's not a place that you expect anything great. When you approach it, the fens are flat and uninteresting, for the most part, and in terms of roads, it's really "out of the way". Compared to the magnificent Ely Cathedral, it's not much to speak of! Can anything great come from it? This is why it makes such a great comparison with Nazareth. The Blessed Virgin wanted Walsingham to remind us of the Incarnation; to remind us, that the Word became Flesh in a backwater, in a hick town, a place on the margins. This request of hers speaks to us of the little, of humility, of the Divine condescension, of him who did not count equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave. God did not become incarnate in some great palace, but in the humble house of Nazareth. The Word made flesh dwelt among the common people, not among the rarefied courts of Kings. And the very nature of the Incarnation demands particularity, and place, location, and actual persons to be involved, in other words, you and I are bound up in the story. God comes to dwell in us, as he dwelt in Nazareth. This is what makes Walsingham special - that God became man in Nazareth, and thus all places are now Nazareths, and all people are Holy Houses for the indwelling presence of Christ.



God's ways, though are not indeed our ways, and his thoughts not our thoughts! His ways and thoughts are *so* much better! "Can anything good come from Nazareth!" That's one of our thoughts. *"In the sixth month the Angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin, betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary."* That's one of God's, and that is the message of Walsingham. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it... He was in the world and though the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not! But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God!* Our Lady of Walsingham, pray for us.