

## **Mass for the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Abortion Act**

**Westminster Cathedral, 27<sup>th</sup> October 2017**

In the Book of Jeremiah we read, “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamenting and weeping bitterly: it is Rachel weeping for her children, refusing to be comforted for her children, because they are no more” (Jer. 31:15). These words describe the lamentation of the Church this evening, which mourns the deaths of almost nine million children whose lives have been destroyed by abortion since 1967. It is a shocking statistic and one that few people could ever have envisaged fifty years ago. Over time attitudes change, today many people focus solely on ‘choice’ and ‘the right to choose’ as a basis for their actions, and whilst they see a victory of sorts, each and every abortion is a tragedy for all concerned.

The prophet Jeremiah continues a few verses later and speaks of the hope that comes from the Lord, “There is hope for your future after all, the Lord declares, your children will return to their homeland.” While it is right to grieve, lament and cry out, it is even more necessary to pray for a change of mind and heart by all people so that the lives of mothers and their children can be better protected and pregnant mothers helped and supported more effectively. His words encourage all of us to work to improve the protection of the unborn child in our own context, whether as families, politicians, or members of groups. We are called to trust in the Lord who alone can open minds and hearts to the truth and reality of abortion and bring about change.

As the bishops of England, Wales and Scotland have recognised in their recent statement to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Abortion Act, there is always a complexity about the decision to have an abortion that must not be underestimated. Many factors lead to this choice and often diminish moral culpability. At the same time the bishops have spoken consistently of the respect due to every human life, from conception to natural death; i.e. that the tiniest and most vulnerable need, most especially, our care and love. The words of psalm 139 speak powerfully of the

presence of God's love in earliest stages of life: "You created my inmost self, knit me together in my mother's womb. For so many marvels I thank you; a wonder am I, and all your works are wonders." (Ps. 139:13-14)

Behind the statistics, there are the countless lives of mothers who have chosen to have an abortion, of fathers who may be known or unknown, of families and networks of people affected by the trauma of these decisions. The first reading tells us that every life and death has its effect on others since we are interdependent and part of one family, the family of God's household. An important aspect of the work of evangelisation is to help people to recover a sense of the mystery of God before whom we stand and to whom we are accountable. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* on care for our common home writes, "Since everything is interrelated, concern for the protection of nature is also incompatible with the justification of abortion. How can we genuinely teach the importance of concern for other vulnerable beings, however troublesome or inconvenient they may be, if we fail to protect a human embryo, even when its presence is uncomfortable and creates difficulties?" (*Laudato Si* 120).

In the gospel which we just heard, Jesus speaks the familiar words which offer consolation and hope to all who are estranged or distant from the Lord, "Come to me, all you who labour and are overburdened, and I will give you rest. Shoulder my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." (Mt 11:28) They offer an invitation to rest in his embrace and to lay one's head on his breast. He offers healing and peace.

The trauma of abortion is well-known to confessors and counsellors and many women bear a deep wound of suffering because of the decision that was taken, often in difficult and complex circumstances. Recent Popes have recognised this fact when they have spoken powerfully of God's mercy. Echoing earlier words of St. John Paul II, Pope Francis has written of those who have had an abortion:

"I am well aware of the pressure that has led them to this decision. I know that it is an existential and moral ordeal. I have met so many women who bear in their heart

the scar of this agonising and painful decision. What has happened is profoundly unjust; yet only understanding the truth of it can enable one not to lose hope.” (Letter to Archbishop Fisichella for the Year of Mercy, 1 September 2015)

Both St. John Paul II and Pope Francis recognise the burden of guilt that often accompanies the decision to destroy a human life in the womb. They speak insistently of the unfailing and abundant mercy of God for all who turn to Him in repentance and with a desire for forgiveness. As Pope St John Paul II said:

“If you have not already done so, give yourselves over with humility and trust to repentance. The Father of mercies is ready to give you his forgiveness and peace in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. To the same Father and his mercy you can with sure hope entrust your child.” (The Gospel of Life, 99)

These words offer hope to women bearing the guilt of abortion and to all those who have in any way cooperated with the sin of abortion. The promise of God’s mercy is also an invitation to men who have treated their wives, girlfriends and women they have met in casual relationships with less than utmost respect and love, or who have failed to take seriously their responsibilities to unborn children. They invite each one of us to renew our commitment to the good of human life and care for mothers who are pregnant and in need.

We are called to cherish life with tenderness and warmth and expand our hearts so that they are always concerned for the good of others, especially the tiniest and most vulnerable.

Bishop John Sherrington