

As we stand let's pray.

Take my words lord and speak through them. Take our minds and think through them. And take our hearts and set them on fire with love for you, for we ask this for the sake of your son, our saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Warm greetings to all of you here and all of you watching online on this wonderful spring afternoon from the centre of Bradford. Greetings from myself and greetings also from Bishop Nick, Bishop of Leeds, who I'm representing here today.

Thank you so much Jerry and Canon Paul and the whole team here at Bradford Cathedral. It's so lovely to hear real music from a real choir, even if we're socially distanced, and could have more people here, and will have more people here, we trust, in the days ahead, but it is great to have this first fruits, as it were, this taste of being together here.

And I also want to recognise, although he's a bit of behind a pillar, Peter Townley - The Ven Peter Townley. Archdeacon of Pontefract, and the great champion of the Mothers' Union and has been for many years and it's wonderful that you're here today in in that capacity here; thank you Peter.

It's appropriate that we are celebrating this work still in lockdown because the Mothers' Union all over the world is deeply involved in the battle against the COVID virus. I think sometimes, maybe, people from the outside don't actually recognise that, but the Mothers' Union, especially in parts of the world like Africa is in many ways the front line against COVID and I think we need to recognise that and we need to celebrate it, whether that's in the democratic Republic of Congo where Mothers' Union members are stitching face masks; training people in anti-virus hygiene; looking after people who are suffering because of the virus, whether they're widows or orphans or other people; doing brave and courageous work. We need to celebrate the work of Mothers' Union even as we battle COVID.

Also here in the Diocese of Leeds; and I want to pay tribute to the work of Mother's Union across this diocese and across this country as well. Looking after the most vulnerable, whether in prison, whether the elderly, or in many other ways. And the passage that we heard read from Luke's gospel, the story of the annunciation, is the story of a calling: the calling of God through the angel Gabriel to this young woman, Mary, to be the mother of the messiah - the saviour of the world.

It's a passage that reminds us of the calling that Mary Sumner welcomed in spite of the obstacles she faced, to found a movement those years ago that has spread now from that moment to claim some 4 million members in some 84 countries around the world. What a spectacular example of what the call of God can achieve. Whatever we think that we can do, if it's something that God is behind, there are no limits to where this will end. It's a calling that we continue to celebrate today as we commission Pat and Tim to be Mothers' Union chaplains here in Bradford and in the Wakefield episcopal area, and it's so wonderful that you have heard that call, that you've responded to it, and we rejoice to be able to be commissioning you today.

And it's also a call which I hope, many of you watching, will be aware of even as you're part of this service. It was very sad last Friday. I was at Richard Bailey's funeral. Many of you will remember Richard Bailey, husband of Jean Bailey - Jean B - as opposed to Jean T who's with us today (Jean Thurman), who we said goodbye to a few years ago, but her husband Richard, who was again a great champion of the Mothers' Union and a real support to Jean Bailey, passed away just at the end of February, and we said goodbye to him at his funeral last week, and it made me realize that this incredible team, who particularly pioneered the work of bringing together the Mothers' Union from across three distinct dioceses, and as it were led the way really. I remember Bishop Nick praising the work of the Mothers' Union as being right in the forefront of addressing the culture change that was needed when we had to become one diocese out of three, and now we're in this new chapter we're no longer a new diocese - we're a young diocese - but we need new members and we need new officers, and I want to ask you if you're listening to listen to your heart, to hear the call as Mary did, as Mary Sumner did, and as so many others have done through the ages, and maybe to hear God calling you to step up to continue the work of the Mothers' Union here in this diocese today.

So that was our gospel reading the reading of a calling, but as we celebrate the Festival of the Annunciation here right on the cusp of Holy Week, and as we come to commemorate Good Friday, I want to take us to another gospel scene. I'd like us to go with Mary to the foot of the cross, on which the child that had been conceived in her womb by the holy spirit, now hangs dying.

Most of the disciples, the men at any rate, have run away in understandable fear and confusion. It was a risky place to be, but a group of women including Jesus' mother and Mary Magdalene stay with Jesus to the bitter end.

And from the cross Jesus looks down and says to his mother "woman here is your son" and to the beloved disciple "here is your mother".

We sometimes talk about Pentecost as the birthday of the church: the spirit is given spectacularly to the disciples gathered in the upper room after Jesus' resurrection. But Cynthia Bourgeault and other scholars have suggested that maybe this scene, at the foot of the cross, may have a stronger claim to that title. This is where the church really began; this is where a new community was born, at the foot of the cross, in response to the call of Jesus.

As Jesus says in John 16, when a woman is in labour she has pain because her hour has come. When somebody says that in the gospel of John you know that you have to open your ears and listen. When a woman is in labour she has pain because her hour has come, but when her child is born she no longer remembers the anguish, because the joy of having brought a human being into the world.

When Mary, years before at the wedding in Cana, had asked Jesus to help because the wine had run out Jesus replied "my hour has not yet come" but now as he is crucified Jesus' hour has indeed come. The anguish is here. Jesus is dying and Mary is losing her son according to

the flesh. But from that death, in that moment of death, a new family is born. In Jesus' words, born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or the will of man, but born of God.

From that hour we read the beloved disciple takes Jesus' mother into his own home, and that own home becomes, as it were, a home for the whole family of God. The promise of Isaiah is fulfilled. The children born in the time of your bereavement, will yet say in your hearing, this place is too crowded for me, make room for me to settle. Isn't that a wonderful promise for us to hear even in this church that we're rattling around in, this cathedral?

This place is too crowded for me. That's the promise of Isaiah; that's the promise that was fulfilled when Jesus created this new community. And isn't that a wonderful prophecy of the worldwide church and even the worldwide Mothers' Union.

Because, of course, this is what the Mothers' Union is all about: the strengthening of the family and the creation of a new family; a new worldwide family. Often in the face of huge suffering and death. As many of us have discovered in our partner church in the Sudan it's been the Mothers' Union who has often kept the church there going and serving when the men were imprisoned, or drafted into the army to wage war against their own people.

As we hear from the Sudan and other parts of Africa it's the Mothers' Union that teaches people, that teaches communities, how to fight the virus and that cares for orphans and widows.

What a remarkable story; a story indeed to celebrate, especially in this time of pandemic.

But as we celebrate this story, as we hear the call, let's remember where it began: at the foot of the cross - a new family born in, and from, a place of death. Rainbow through the rain.