

**Ecumenical Celebration of Ireland's Patron Saint  
Saint Patrick's Cathedral Dublin  
17.04. 2014**

(Confessions of St Patrick / Romans 8:22-27 / John14:17,12-14)

I was asked to reflect with you this evening on these questions:

**What are we to do today?**

**What way should we be going?**

The very first thing we need to do is to accept the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves.

Things have changed enormously in Irish society these past years and they have changed dramatically for the Churches.

Clearly, the Churches no longer hold the privileged position they once held.

This should not be lamented. It is no bad thing!

For, a spiritual authority cannot be trusted as long as it is wielding temporal power.

Undoubtedly, the Churches have been humiliated, but have they yet been truly humbled?

This is perhaps less certain.

Humiliation *can* lead to humility, but not necessarily so.

Even those humiliated can resist the challenge to embrace Christ's way of humility.

What must we do?

The Sacred Scriptures give us an answer in Paul's famous Christological Hymn (Philippians 2). We should have in us *the same attitude, the same heart, the same mind as found in Christ Jesus.*

What we must *do* is *be* more like Christ!

We must follow Christ's example and put on the apron of humility and do as He did when He stooped to wash His brothers' feet.

We must positively welcome the opportunity offered to us at this time in our history to become a humbled people in the midst of the nation. We must be renewed in the spirit of true service.

Patrick, paves the way for us in this respect. He was clearly a man of humble heart.

He presents himself in all truth as *a sinner, one looked down upon by many*, one who did not always get it right, one acutely aware of his deficiencies, one who needed to undergo a radical conversion and change of heart. He explains that at a time he *did not know the true God, but, the Lord opened up his awareness to his lack of faith, so that he might turn to the Lord his God with all his heart.*

Through this realisation, his proper self-assessment, Patrick came to the point of discernment. He *was given wisdom which could distinguish between good and evil.*

If we are to proclaim the gospel credibly then we must be as blatantly honest as Patrick was in regard to our real state and we must undergo a radical conversion similar to that which he underwent.

Our changed way of life will then become a credible proclamation of the message we announce.

If we are to have a positive, transforming impact upon society, we must be seen to incarnate Christ's true humility and real love; we must be seen to embody Christ's generous hospitality and genuine

welcome; we must be truthful and honest in our dealings with others as we dialogue with them, for this is how Christ related to those to whom He was sent. Moreover, we must be as really committed to reaching out to those on the margins, as Christ was, proclaiming to them a message of hope.

This brings me to the second point I feel called to make.

Our humbled state should lead us to hope.

In his writings, the Apostle Paul makes clear his firm conviction that it is precisely in and through human weakness that God's strength is best made manifest.

In the text we heard proclaimed this evening, from Paul's Letter to the Romans, the apostle spoke of one of the areas of his life in which he experienced his weakness most: in the poverty of his prayer.

Dare I say that this has perhaps been one of the weaker areas of our Christian witness in this land?

In the past we functioned largely as a Church of works.

We were busy *doing* so many things.

Without denying that much good was accomplished in the various activities that were undertaken by many good people, there was surely a down side to all this *doing*.

Very subtly, but nonetheless really, through all they were busy *doing* for others, the Churches gained control over people's lives and won influence for themselves.

I suspect in most cases it was not realised that this was what was happening.

It seems to me that we must ask ourselves at this point in time what we are offering to people now that we are no longer doing many of the things we once did for them in the past.

The call today is to offer people something not out of our riches, but out of our poverty.

I dare to suggest that we are now better disposed to offer people what they need most: the message of hope they long for, and a true spirituality ... one that connects with where people are at in life.

I believe that the trials we have gone through better equip us to speak of hope, and also of the real meaning of life, to a battered and bruised society.

What makes me say this?

Well, according to the teaching of the Sacred Scriptures, hope is born of pain and suffering endured that has been worked through without evasion or denial.

St Paul makes this clear to us in the fifth chapter of his Letter to the Romans.

This connects with where most people are at in a world marked by pain and suffering.

The hope of which the apostle speaks in that passage of Romans, and in other like passages, is what I call *holy hope*.

*Holy hope* is not just wishful thinking for a better future.

*Holy hope* is God's gift to us in the here and now as we dare to do what we are called to do and embrace the cross of Christ.

It is precisely in our wounded state, aware of our brokenness, which has been unmasked by all that has befallen us, that we are called to bear witness to hope.

How can we do this?

Let me venture this answer: by daring to believe in for ourselves, and also advocate in others, confidence in what has been called *a spirituality of the present risen-ness of Jesus*.

St Paul teaches: *Christ among us! Here is our hope. The risen Christ is in our midst.*

Our experience of, our living in our flesh, *the present risen-ness of Jesus*, can only be the fruit of daring to die to our former way of being.

It is our dying to the old, to what is past, that will permit us to embrace the new life of Christ in which we are called to share.

What we are called to propose to others, what is confided to us for this age and generation, is what Patrick first brought to this land: the eternal newness of the gospel in the person of *Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and tomorrow*.

To become bearers of this message, men and women who testify to hope, we have to learn to let go off many of the false securities we are inclined to cling to.

An impoverishment is asked of us here.

To be up to living this impoverishment we have to find the strength required of us in prayer.

It was in prayer that Patrick found the strength he needed to fully embrace his Christian vocation and dare to become an apostle of hope to this land where he had once been held in captivity.

He tells us: *I prayed frequently ... More and more the love of God increased ... My sense of awe before God grew and my spirit was moved.*

And he does not hide from us the harsh circumstances in which he prayed, telling us that he was undeterred by the ills that befell and surrounded him.

Nothing less than a similarly courageous, indeed quite heroic, engagement in prayer is required of us.

It is only this that will see us through.

It is in fidelity to prayer and by a commitment to a faith-filled, faithful, reading of the Sacred Scriptures that we will gain the strength we need for the mission confided to us today.

It is only in this way that we will develop the spiritual intuition necessary to discern God's will about *what is good, perfect and pleasing to Him* for this day and age.

Why is prayer so absolutely vital?

Prayer is important because it confounds our self-importance and refrains us from imagining that we are more important than we are!

Prayer reminds us that it is in God's work that we are engaged and whatever good we accomplish is ultimately not our own, but His work in and through us.

To sit quietly and listen places us before God in a posture of humility – something that can be difficult for many of us.

As one contemporary Benedictine writer, Sr Joan Chittister, OSB, reminds us, *Humility is the lost virtue of our time, one that is crying out to heaven for rediscovery.*

In my opinion, it is only our realisation that we need to stay firmly committed to and rooted in prayer that will help us to remain humble.

One Anglican clergyman (a Canon of this cathedral), who is retiring from Parish ministry these days, was asked in an interview recently what was the best advice he was ever given. He replied without hesitation that it was something Bishop Stephen Neill said when he visited the Divinity College where he was being trained.

Canon Michael Kennedy explained that in response to an ordinand's question in regard to the Bishop's counsel to those embarking on a life of ministry, Stephen Neill replied: *Do it on your knees.*

If only the Churches' humiliation brought us all together to that posture and made us kneel in prayer!

If only we did ministry that way!

Then, I am convinced, we would experience the spiritual renewal ardently longed for and greatly needed in this land.

Let me introduce the final point I want to make this evening: the importance of Christians praying together.

It was as the disciples were praying *all together in one place* that the Spirit of Pentecost, the Spirit of mission, was given to them.

It is encouraging that we are gathered together in this place this evening, coming as we do from different Christian traditions, to celebrate *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.*

What we discover in acts of shared worship such as this evening's celebration is our unity in Christ. And furthermore we are led to recognise how the unity we experience is enriched by our differences.

The gospel passage we heard reminded us of something we can all so easily forget: *There are many rooms in the Father's house.*

Together with each other, in our diversity, we are called to form *the one household of God.*

This evening's event is a shining example of how we can become in celebration something beautiful for God and, by God's grace, attractive for and inviting to the world around us.

In the one Church of Christ there are many rooms, each one has its own style, shade and colouring. The call and challenge for us is to strive to be mutually accommodating in the one household of God, respectful and admiring of the rich diversity and contrasts which exist between us. In this way we show those who look on at us from outside that in God's house all are welcome and all can find their home.

Words of St Bernard, which he originally applied to the various Religious Orders in the Church, remain ever timely.

I believe that they be expanded to speak of the diversity to be found among our different Christian traditions in the one Church of Christ.

I suggest that we apply them to what we have lived here this evening.

Bernard exclaims: *I admire them all. I belong to one by observance, but to all by charity. We all need one another: the spiritual good I do not own and possess I receive from others .... In this exile,*

*the Church is still on pilgrimage and is, in a certain sense plural: she is single plurality and plural unity. All our diversities which make manifest the richness of God's gifts, will continue to exist in the one house of the Father; which has many rooms. Now there is division of graces; then there will be distinctions of glory. Unity, both here and there, consists in one and the same charity.*

If only, we could use Bernard's words to explain what we are given to experience from within our particular denomination when thinking of all the others which, together with our own, make up the one Christian Family:

For me the truth of Bernard's words has been illustrated by the pilgrimage we have lived here this evening, guided by Patrick's testimony in his *Confessiones*.

As we made our way around this cathedral, a symbol of the one House of God, we found ourselves, at different stages in different rooms, as it were.

But, as we journeyed we all listened to the same word of God and its echo in the teaching of our national apostle.

At the end of our journey we are gathered in one place to make one and the same profession of faith as we recite the creed Patrick brought to us.

Finally, before leaving this cathedral church, before returning to our respective places of life and mission, we will all gather around a fire bowl to light a new fire.

May we see in this fire a beacon of hope for Ireland.

May we pursue our pilgrim way, walking humbly with our God, faithful to prayer, attentive to the Risen Christ who walks life's road with us, opening our understanding to the full message of the Scriptures, with the insights they give us in regard to the suffering and humiliation we have endured these latter years!

May we go forth from this place changed, converted in the spirit of holy hope, to glorify the Lord by our lives and announce by our whole way of being the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Let us leave the last word to Patrick: *This is how we can repay such blessings, when our lives change and we come to know God, to praise and bear witness to His great wonders before every nation under heaven.*

Amen!