

Mass of Thanksgiving – 22/7/19

Yesterday, during my address at the ordination ceremony, I referred to the fact that my preparation for this calling in life began the day I was baptised in April 1965. Of course, at no point along the journey from childhood to adulthood, from student to priest did I have any understanding of where the journey would take me. Becoming a priest was always at the back of my mind even from my earliest days. There was no one clear defining moment, or road to Damascus like experience, it was always there. The rhythm of the church's seasons formed the background music to my formative years. Sunday mass, family prayer, benediction, pilgrimages to knock were all part of growing up in Ireland of that time. Virginia, my hometown, was a close-knit community surrounded by forest and hills and situated on the shores of Lough Ramor. In many ways it was an idyllic place to grow up in. I know times move on and things change – and a lot of things change for the better – but I feel so privileged and blessed to have grown up in that simpler time.

My vocation was nurtured in family and community in a natural and easy way. No one put on any pressure either to follow that call or to decline it. But I know in following it I received all the support I could ask for and more. I suppose it was a sign of the times that in my leaving cert class of about 60 students in the C.B.S in Kells – 5 pursued religious vocations – 3 were ordained priests and 2 joined the Christian brothers. The days of such a rich seedbed for vocations are gone, at least for the time being, but we must strive to nurture vocations still in every way we can. And the best way we can do that is to simply be happy to be people of faith; to wear a smile on our face because we are believers and to do so as we worship and pray so that others may know that our faith makes us people of joy.

In 1989 I was ordained to the priesthood and it is the custom when someone is ordained to produce prayer cards to mark the occasion and to give to those who attend and to friends and neighbours. It is a lovely coincidence that the prayer I chose for my

ordination card is the responsorial psalm of today's Mass – the beautiful psalm 62. A psalm of longing for God – an expression of the longing that is in everyone's heart whether they can identify it or not. *“O God you are my God for you I long, for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water”*. This longing for God, for oneness with him, plays around the edges of our souls and sometimes can be mistaken for other desires and yearnings, but it is never satisfied or quenched until we allow God enter our hearts and minds and flood our lives with his refreshing Spirit.

Today, we very appropriately, celebrate the feast of Mary Magdalen, a woman who knew unrest, unease and disruption in her life until she encountered the Lord and in that moment of encounter her life changed completely. She knew what she had been missing, and she knew where her life was going from that day forward. In her total acceptance of Jesus as her Lord and Saviour she married her life to his and became like Martha and Mary in yesterday's gospel, his trusted advisor and confidant. It was to her that he first appeared after his resurrection and it was to her that he entrusted the task of bringing the disciples the message that he had risen. In that moment Mary became the apostle to the apostles and assumed in Christian faith and tradition a position of huge importance and significance, a position we need to unpack again in these present times as we address the situation and the future of our church.

Once again, we need to encounter Christ personally, and not become bogged down in endless disputes about whose interpretation is right or wrong, who has the truth and who doesn't. We will only encounter the real Jesus through prayer and through reading his words in the Gospels. The real Jesus is not the meek and mild version whom everyone accepts because he is inoffensive and easily side-lined, but the Jesus who challenges us to change our lives in sometimes painful and difficult ways.

Today, as I stand before you, a humble sinner called to serve in this great diocese, this wonderful place, the only thing I can promise is to try to get closer to Jesus each day

and try to present Him to you in an honest and truthful way conscious of my own weakness and limitations.

Prayer and scripture are the most obvious ways to encounter Christ. But I have found throughout 30 years of priesthood that Christ is also encountered in the people you are fortunate to meet; in the faith they display and in the most difficult and trying of circumstances. In that regard, as an example of what I mean, I want to mention briefly a husband and wife in my last parish of Bailieborough. Bridgie and P.J.. After their sons had grown up they fostered children and over the past six or seven years had fostered a brother and sister who needed a lot of love and care to begin to live a life that all children should be guaranteed. They received that and more from Bridgie and P.J. and their lives were turned around and they are so much the better for it. Unfortunately, three years ago Bridgie was given a serious cancer diagnosis and during those years I came to know her well as she received more bad news in that time than most of us will ever, please God, receive in a lifetime. But during that time she remained remarkable positive and she greeted all comers with a big smile on her face and received the Eucharist with joy and tremendous faith. Throughout severe difficulties she, along with her husband P.J., cared for their fostered children and gave them the environment of love that they needed. P.J. and Bridgie themselves had a very special relationship. The house was a pleasure to visit and I often came away refreshed and renewed in my faith myself and thankful for the gifts I had received. Bridgie, unfortunately, died just last week and we held her funeral in St. Anne's in Bailieborough on Thursday last. She faced her last weeks and days with such resolve, and with such lack of self pity that she, in many ways, gave us all hope of new life ourselves and ministered to us who knew her, more than we ministered to her. I am thankful for the countless people like her who I have met and please God I will continue to meet as this new chapter in my life begins

It is the people I have in my life that I am thankful for today. A prayer of praise and thanksgiving is the only prayer on my lips. As that beautiful Psalm 62 says ***“So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory. For your love is better***

than life, my lips will speak your praise". So I praise God for where life has taken me – praise him, even in the midst of anxiety, for where I am being brought – and praise him for being here in the midst of such friendly and hospitable people as I look forward to what the next stage brings and how you can minister to me and I to you. ***"For you have been my help Lord; in the shadow of your wings I rejoice"***.

Introduction

Good evening. Welcome to this Mass of Thanksgiving this evening as I begin my ministry as Auxilliary Bishop here in Armagh. I give thanks for my calling which has taken a very unexpected turn. I give thanks for my parents and family and their unwavering support. I give thanks for the people I have encountered in all the parishes and schools where I have ministered and I give thanks for the goodness God has poured into my life through them.

Today I also I give thanks for those who helped to prepare the ceremonies on Saturday evening, yesterday and this Mass today. A lot of hard work went into preparing what was such and a touching and meaningful event for me and hopefully for those who were present as well. I offer this Mass tonight for the intentions of all those people. May God reward them for their goodness and kindness.

Tonight we also remember specially in our prayers all those who were caught up in the frightening events that occurred at the blessing of the graves in St. Patrick's Parish in Dundalk yesterday. We pray for Patsy McCabe who was seriously injured and for Fr. Mark O'Hagan, his staff and all the parishioners who are so shocked and saddened by what happened.

Today we celebrate the feast of Mary Magdalen, the apostle to the apostles, and as we honour her contribution to Jesus' life and mission we pray that each of us may follow her example of loyal service and steadfast faith as we journey towards God together.