

Sermon: Ascension Sunday 2022 – Armagh Pilgrimage to Knock

In the year 2000 U2 released a song called *'Stuck in a Moment that you can't get out of'*. It describes the experience of not being able to see beyond a particularly difficult or traumatic moment in time and to move on from it. It is a common experience for many people, as life can sometimes become an uphill struggle, suddenly bereft of the supports that provided strength and motivation in the past. Such feelings surely engulfed the disciples in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. They stood rooted to the ground gazing into the empty sky after the ascending Jesus not comprehending what had just happened. Jesus had prepared them for this moment but now when faced with the reality of loss they are dumbfounded and frozen in shock. In fact, they are so stuck in the moment that two angels appear to prompt them to move and to remind them that Jesus would return.

There have been many times in the history of the Church when it has been dumbfounded and frozen in shock at the events that were happening around it. The collapse of the Roman Empire threatened the Church with extinction in its first 500 years. After 1000 years the papacy had come under the power of a few of the noble families in Rome who used it to establish their own temporal power

and their corruption almost brought ruin to the Church. In the 1500's the protestant reformation tore the Church apart and we still feel its repercussions today. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, however, the Church has always found a way to respond, a new way to face and overcome the challenges it has encountered.

In this present age we are again surrounded by difficulties on every side and are experiencing a crisis of faith in our world. Society has changed more rapidly in the past 100 years than it did in the 2000 years before that. The advances in science and technology have transformed the way we live, interact, and think about the world. Rampant materialism and greed have led to the growth of atheism and secularism which has become increasingly militant and hostile to the life-giving, hope-filled, message of Jesus.

Here in Ireland we have witnessed the same shift in attitudes over the past few. In the recent debate about the relocation of the National Maternity Hospital to St. Vincent's, we heard once again the pro-abortion viewpoint given great prominence and aired through every avenue possible. More sinister though was the attempt to ensure that the Christian message which upholds the dignity, sacredness, and value of life in all its stages could have no place in our healthcare

system and indeed in society, either now or at any point in the future. In the face of such fierce opposition to such basic Christian principles as the right to life we can become a little like the disciples at the ascension, speechless, frozen in inactivity and filled with fear. But for us who are believers and followers of Jesus that is simply not an option. We cannot decide to remain inactive or pick a more opportune time to respond.

When we reflect on the apparition that happened here in Knock in 1879, which is depicted in this beautiful mosaic behind me, we can discern in that event many of the central elements that will be needed in our efforts to renew and reenergise the Irish Church. You will see that St. John carries the book containing the Word of God emphasising its centrality and importance in our faith formation. We need to familiarise ourselves with scripture again and particularly the Gospels. St. Joseph's presence symbolises the power of ordinary human commitment and work carried out in a spirit of quiet and humble prayer. Jesus, as the Lamb of God upon the altar, is at the centre of the scene highlighting the Eucharist as the source and summit of the Christian life. And, at the heart of it all, we are led into a greater understanding and appreciation of these fundamental elements of our faith by the gentle guidance and example of Mary.

It was, as you can see, the lay faithful who received this incredible apparition in a difficult and painful time in this country's history. Through their reverence and through their faithful and detailed recounting of what happened here on the night of 21st August 1879 they did much to strengthen the faith in this country in their own time and in the difficult years that followed. Once again, in this 21st Century, the lay faithful are being asked to lead and inspire a renewal of the faith in Ireland.

As we have seen time and time again in the past, adversity is often the spark for creativity and new life. Because the Church is facing many challenges in the western world it is confronted with the urgency of using the gifts and charisms of all its members, both clerical and lay. The synodal process that we have heard so much about over the past two years has been introduced by Pope Francis to bring into reality the fruits of the Holy Spirit that came through Vatican II. That great council encouraged dialogue and listening with those inside and outside the Church and urged a greater participation of the lay faithful in the mission of the Church.

This is what the synodal process is all about – listening to everyone even when it is uncomfortable. Reflecting on where we are at, and how we need to change and adapt to bring the teaching of Christ into a radically different world. In his

message for today World Communications Day, Pope Francis says, “*The most important task in pastoral activity is the ‘apostolate of the ear’ – to listen before speaking, as the Apostle James exhorts, ‘Let every man be quick to hear, slow to speak’.* Freely giving some of our own time to listen to people is the first act of charity.” Some people have not quite understood that aspect of what the Synod is about. No one is trying to change the Church into something that it is not. It is about finding new ways of continuing the mission of the Church and re-presenting the teaching of Christ in a way that is more effective and suited to the 21st Century. So, as we continue our Synodal process in the years ahead at a Universal, national, and local level, let us pray that inspired by the Holy Spirit, we may together, lay and cleric alike, plant a seed of faith and renewal in our Church. The Lord has ascended into heaven, yet he is still present here, in his Word, in the Church gathered and in the Eucharist. The mission of Jesus Christ must still be completed, and he outlined that mission concisely in today’s gospel: “that in His name repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be preached to all nations”.

We cannot get stuck in this difficult and frightening moment of anti-Christian sentiment. Too many people depend on us. We are not passengers or spectators – we are his witnesses – it is time for all of us to get to work!