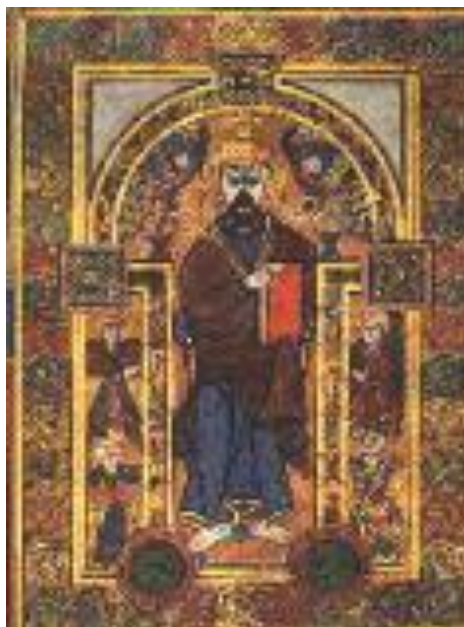


Jesus Christ

Yesterday, Today and Forever



Portrait of Christ
Book of Kells

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Lent 1997

This year is a year of celebration and pride as Limerick City celebrates the eight hundredth anniversary of the granting of its Charter.

When we look back over the centuries, whether in the city or elsewhere in the diocese, we see a mixture of good and bad. There are elements in our history which tell of ineptitude, injustice, hardship and poverty. We might wonder whether it isn't naïve or insensitive to celebrate a history which contains reasons for deep regret as well as grounds for pride.

But anniversaries and celebrations are a part of coming to know ourselves. They are an important step in understanding the foundations on which our future has to be built.

It is good to celebrate who we are – to take pride in the past, and also to learn from the past, so that we can shape the future. The really creative, forward looking person is not the one who imagines that it is possible to start from scratch. He or she is the one who builds something new on the inheritance we have received.

We are getting ready, in common with Christians all over the world, to celebrate the two thousandth anniversary of the birth of Jesus Christ. This too is an opportunity to celebrate who we are, to take pride, to learn and to build.

The theme that has been chosen for this year, 1997, as part of the preparation for this celebration, is "Jesus Christ, the one saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever (cf. Heb 13:8)" (Pope John Paul II, *The Coming of the Third Millennium* [Tertio Millennio Adveniente] 40).

CELEBRATING WHO WE ARE

Limerick 800 focuses on one aspect of our identity – what it means to be a citizen of Limerick. The second millennium of Christ's birth, however, celebrates what it means to be human: "In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of humanity truly becomes clear" (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World*, 22).

There are questions deep in every human heart, so deep that we often evade them: What does life mean? Where does it lead? Why does life often seem so unfair, so painful? Why are even our most unselfish hopes so often disappointed? What awaits us after death? What has happened to our loved ones who have died? Jesus responds beyond all our expectations because in him God comes to meet our questioning.

Faith in him gives rise to the fundamental Christian response: Be thankful (Col 3:15). "Who we are" is something to celebrate because the infinite Creator of the universe loves us, calls each of us by name, sent his Son to share his life with us, calls us to a joy beyond all pain and mourning and fragility and failure. That is who we are: sons and daughters of the infinite God.

Perhaps we have become a little afraid of celebration and of gratitude. We can see clearly the failure and harshness and blindness in our history, even in our recent history. But a community that is unwilling to rejoice in the riches of its tradition, is a community which has no source of inspiration and no sense of identity. That emptiness would be multiplied if we were foolish enough to imagine that we were so superior to those who have gone before us that we could build a future which would be immune to failure and harshness and blindness.

Jesus' response is beyond our expectations because he tells us that he is building such a future and that we can be part of it. All that is good, the achievements in art and science, the honest, dedicated work, the heroism with which people face crises and tragedies, the kindness to neighbours and to strangers, the forgiveness offered to individuals who have hurt us, the love we feel for those closest to us -- all of these "we will find again, illuminated and transfigured", free from everything that threatens and obstructs them, when Jesus comes again (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* [Gaudium et Spes] 39). That is why it is right to celebrate – everything that is good in our lives and our world lives forever!

If we felt no need to celebrate, it would mean that we were losing sight of the wonder of the Gospel. Commenting on the words "Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and forever" an ancient writer says that the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews "knows that the mystery is always new, that the mind in understanding it will never deprive it of its freshness" (St Maximus the Confessor).

Celebration is about recovering the freshness, about understanding that the mystery of Christ is always new.

TAKING PRIDE IN THE PAST

As we look back over the two millennia of Christianity, we should take pride in the many things that we hope to find again.

Each us also has a personal inheritance of faith. We are the heirs of a family, mothers and fathers, grandparents and great-grandparents; we have been shaped and enriched by our parishes and neighbourhoods, our teachers and friends.

That inheritance is full of quiet heroism when people faced a hostile environment, heartbreaking sadness or terrifying difficulties with confident faith. It is full of loyal and persevering commitment to the life and the faith of the Church. It is full of "little nameless unremembered acts of kindness and of love" (Wordsworth). The details may grow hazy in our minds as time passes, but that inheritance lives in us; it has helped to make us what we are.

We also have a wider heritage. In this diocese, we can take pride in the faith of Saint Munchin and Saint Ita and of all the men and women who laid the foundations on which the church in Limerick has been built.

We can take pride in the courage of Blessed Maurice MacKenraghty of Kilmallock and of the other martyrs who died in this diocese -- Bishop Terence Albert O'Brien, O.P. of Emly, who ministered to the citizens of Limerick during the siege, and Bishop Patrick O'Healy O.F.M. of Mayo and Father Conn O'Rourke who were martyred in Kilmallock.

We can take pride in the work of religious sisters and brothers who established schools and hospitals and who dedicated their talents to the welfare of the people of Limerick, serving Jesus Christ in his brothers and sisters. We can take pride in the missionary effort of men and women who left their homes to bring the Good News to Africa, Latin America and Asia.

The people who went before us were not supermen and superwomen. Like us, they had weaknesses, they met obstacles, they had to struggle, they were tempted to give up. What sustained them was their faith in Jesus Christ. He is the same yesterday, today and forever. We take pride in the past, not in order to rest on our laurels. On the contrary, we take pride in the past so that we can know what we have to live up to and to build upon. And so that we can learn to place our confidence where they did, in Jesus who is with us to the end of time.

Their prayer for us is, I have no doubt, like the prayer of St Patrick for the Irish, not just that we would be like him, but that we would "reach out to greater things and do better" (Confessions 47).

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Celebrating the wonder of Christ's message and reflecting on the wholehearted way that many people have responded puts a question to us. It brings home the challenge of living up to the implications of what we believe. Saying Yes to the Incarnation, is not just a matter of words or even of actions; it is a way of living. It costs, as the poet put it, "not less than everything" (T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*).

Not everybody is willing to pay that price. History provides many instances when Christians "departed from the spirit of Christ and his Gospel... and indulged in ways of thinking and acting which were truly forms of counter-witness and scandal" (*The Coming of the Third Millennium*, 33).

The Pope refers to faults by people on all sides which contributed to the divisions and the hurts between Christian traditions. He refers to instances of intolerance and to the fundamentally misguided attempts which were sometimes made with a view to compelling people by violence to believe in the Gospel or to conform to a particular Christian tradition.

We acknowledge these faults, not so that we can feel superior, but in order that we can recognise our own half-heartedness and failures in living the spirit of Christ and his Gospel. Our sin can prevent the Church "from fully mirroring the image of her crucified Lord, the supreme witness of patient love and of humble meekness" (*The Coming of the Third Millennium* 35).

What other lessons can we learn from looking back? We learn how quickly things can change. We learn not to take things for granted. We learn that each generation has to take responsibility for its own living and passing on of the faith. "Let there be no complacency", the Pope said in Ireland at the end of the seventies. As we approach the end of the nineties we can see how right he was.

Every time a new survey shows a drop in religious practice or in acceptance of the Church's teaching, the commentators announce that the bishops must be very worried. I often wonder why they think it should just concern the bishops? Any Christian who is not concerned about how fully the Gospel is being understood and celebrated and lived, any Christian who does not consider it his or her responsibility to make the Gospel known, is already failing the challenge.

Anyone who thinks that the challenge makes no serious demands on them is being complacent. To sit back and wonder what the bishop or the priests or the schools are going to do about it would be to evade one's responsibility. The lesson we learn from the past is that those who built the foundations of our Christian inheritance were people who tried to love God with all their heart and soul and might; they were people for whom their faith was the central driving force of their lives; they were people in whose lives one could see the inspiration that came from their faith. If we lack their sense of commitment and urgency, why look any further for the reason why so many people fail to be touched by the Good News?

What are our weaknesses and blind spots? Blind spots, by definition, are difficult to see! But one of them is perhaps a certain loss of joy and hope. "What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord" (2 Cor 4:5). Why then do we sometimes feel disheartened? Why do we sometimes feel embarrassed, as if the Church's vision was something outdated or limiting? Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and forever, should be a source of wonder, amazement, joy about who we are and what our destiny is. If people do not find that joy in us who claim to be his followers, why do we wonder that they do not flock to follow him with us?

Every age has its particular blind spots in the form of prejudice, sectarianism and injustice towards other groups. The challenge to us is to regard every human being as our brother or sister in Christ – those whose way of life seems alien, those whose opinions we most profoundly disagree with, those whose political, cultural or religious attitudes are utterly different from ours. The challenge is to look to those who feel excluded in our society -- travellers, people who are HIV positive, prisoners, drug abusers – as people who are called to the same wonderful promise that give us our hope and joy.

The lesson of the past is that joyful and confident faith in Jesus Christ, yesterday, today and forever, together with the effort to recognise him in all his brothers and sisters, are the firm foundation of the heritage we have received. Now it is our responsibility to lay the same foundation for those who come after us.

A NEW SPRINGTIME

Every generation, the Pope said in Knock, "with its own mentality and characteristics, is like a new continent to be won for Christ. The Church must constantly look for new ways that will enable her to

understand more profoundly and to carry out with renewed vigour the mission received from her Founder".

In other words, being a missionary is a task for every Christian, even those who never go abroad. The new continent is right here in the changing culture of our time.

It seems obvious that the Gospel message is not "at home" in this new culture as it was in the past. That is because it is our job to show that it belongs. We are the ones who have to discover the joy and the meaning that the Gospel can bring to the kind of world we live in, with its advances in technology and communications, with its new moral and social challenges, with its inequalities and its fears. The Gospel has never been lived by anybody in this kind of world; we are the pioneers who have to discover how Christ speaks to the contemporary world and how we can be his messengers to it.

We are painfully aware that many people, in our own families and neighbourhoods, appear to have lost sight of the hope and the inspiration and the vision that the Good News offers. They do not seem to be able to find that hope and vision in the Church.

The fault does not lie in the message of Christ. The message is just as powerful today as at any time in the past; it is just as capable of bringing its promise to the third millennium as to the second and the first.

Our first duty is to try to ensure that other people can see the joy of the Gospel in the way that we live. We need to understand the factors which obscure the voice of God and the gift which he gives us in Christ and his Church. We need to rediscover the newness of the message and to realise that if we really understand the Gospel, it is always fresh and vigorous and capable of renewing the face of the earth in a new springtime.

We are called to speak not just to a new generation but to a new millennium. The new continent of the third millennium is our mission field.

BUILDING THE FUTURE

Nowhere is the challenge we face more evident than in the area of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In the coming years parishes will have to come to terms with the implications of having fewer priests. The fall off in the number of contemplatives and in the strength of missionary congregations, the withdrawal of religious from schools and hospitals, will change the face of the Church in Ireland in ways that could scarcely have been envisaged thirty years ago.

We need a courageous look at how we, as a whole community, can carry on the ministries which the religious pioneered. We need to pray for and to encourage priestly vocations. We need to value and renew the consecrated religious life which is "at the very heart of the Church" and "an integral part of the Church's life" (Pope John Paul II, *On the Consecrated Life*, 3).

The characteristic obstacle to the Gospel in our day is a deafness to the "still small voice" of God. Our world is too pressured, too busy, too full of images and sounds, to allow for the depth of reflection and the openness, indeed the stretching, of our minds which is required in order to begin to grasp the greatness of the Gospel. In spite of the sophistication and advancement of our communications technology and the almost unlimited availability of information, the truth of the Gospel is too vast for us. We are comfortable with information that we can file and transmit; we are not so good at meditating on a truth that needs to be savoured, a truth that can transform our lives.

The task of communicating that truth to the new millennium belongs in a special way to the young Church. It is young people who will build the future. To do that, they have to meet Jesus and come to know him. "if they succeed in following the road which he points out to them, they will have the joy of making their own contribution to his presence in the next century and in the centuries to come, until the end of time: 'Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and for ever'" (*The Coming of the Third Millennium*, 59).

HOW CAN WE START?

It is, in the end, the responsibility of each individual and each parish to find ways of responding to the call. The diocese can suggest possible lines that parishes might follow, try to provide the necessary resources and to keep people informed about the what is happening in other parishes and other dioceses.

Every parish should be doing something imaginative, something serious, in the way of preparing for the new millennium. The Lenten period is an opportunity to reflect on what a parish might do, how it might do it, and what help it might need to follow through.

The following are some suggestions made at the meeting in Adare or at the first meeting of the Millennium Steering Committee:

Listening days or evenings in the parish -- These would be an occasion, in the context of prayerful reflection, for looking at our hopes for the future of the parish, at the needs that exist and the gifts that are present among the parishioners. A number of possible ways of approach can be suggested to parishes which would like to undertake such an exercise.

Parish assembly -- An assembly would look at who we are as a parish, to learn from the past, to plan for the future. It is important that such an assembly would not simply plunge into issues and plans. It needs to begin with the question of who we are -- brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

Called by Name programme -- A number of parishes are already undertaking the Called by Name programme which helps people to reflect on their vocation and role in the Church. This programme is not just a matter of theory but requires a serious willingness to follow it up.

GIFT programme -- this is one way to recognise and to foster the place of second level students in the parish community.

Baptism Programme -- Young parents, especially those who may feel distant from the Church, can be helped to see the spiritual, religious dimension of their experience of becoming parents and to recognise the love and support of the community.

Liturgy Group -- A group of parishioners might gather to prepare themselves for the Sunday Mass and to help to enrich the celebration for everybody by working on the liturgy -- music, offertory procession, prayers of the faithful etc. Making the liturgy as good as we can is an important way of inviting people who have drifted away to return.

Lectio Divina and/or Scripture study groups -- There is an often unspoken hunger for the spiritual. Teaching people to discover the riches of the Scriptures can be a powerful way of opening their minds to Jesus Christ. Such a group might take as its programme a reflection on the readings for the coming Sunday.

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February 1997