

St Patrick's Cathedral 17 MARCH 2016

Exordium

Welcome again everyone to this holy place, erected to the memory of St Patrick. In our evening so far, we have evoked the man Patrick, Patrick the bishop, Patrick the witness for Christ and the Gospel. In itself, this is a valuable gesture, at a time when St Patrick's Day is becoming Paddy's Day and, no doubt eventually the apostrophe will be dropped and we'll be celebrating the Paddies! Our commemoration of the national saint comes around every year; this year, however, is saturated with memorials and commemorations, chiefly to do with WWI and the 1916 rising.

Propositio

This evening, it might be good to stand back to ask what we think we are doing when we enact such commemorations and liturgies, both secular and spiritual. In particular, what are we doing here commemorating St Patrick?

Probatio 1

In the first place, it is significant we gather under the auspices of the Dublin Council of Churches. Among the goals of the Council are:

- *To encourage co-operation between churches and inter-church groups, at both local and district (city) level.*
- *To explore within a Christian fellowship, based on mutual love and the presence of Christ among us, the calling of the People of God to pray and work together for the fulfilment of Jesus' prayer 'that all may be one.'*

St Patrick offers us a special opportunity to realise such goals because he takes us back to another time, before the European Reformation, before the tragic split between East and West. It, too, was not a time without stresses and conflict; yet, substantially the Christian church in the time of Patrick was one ecumenical body, with the various parts of the *oikumene*—the inhabited world—in communion. We can all look back to him, a great witness for Christ, the Gospel and the Word of God. As with memorial in the Biblical and Jewish tradition, we evoke a different past to remind ourselves that what has been may be again and also to relativize the present.

Probatio 2

That Biblical and Jewish sense of memorial found a remarkable resonance in the prophets, especially, perhaps in Isaiah 40-55. In the bitter Exile in Babylon, the prophet purposefully evoked the great Exodus from Egypt. Even so, Second Isaiah was overwhelmed not so much by the past as by the future, when he wrote:

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43:18-19)

Thus the words of the prophet brought hope and energy to the people. Isaiah is a good example of what the Biblical and Jewish tradition meant by memorial—it really means *effective* memorial, whereby recalling the past opens us to the potential of the future. The later rabbinic tradition built on that strategy of evocation. We read in the tractate of the Mishnah on the Passover (a suitable reflection as we approach Holy Week):

In every generation a person is duty-bound to regard himself as if he personally has gone forth from Egypt, since it is said, *And you shall tell your son in that day saying, it is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt* (Ex. 13:8).

Therefore, we are duty-bound to thank, praise, glorify, honour, exalt, extol, and bless him who did for our forefathers and for us all these miracles. He brought us forth

from slavery to freedom, anguish to joy, mourning to festival, darkness to great light, subjugation to redemption, so we should say before him, Hallelujah. (Pesahim 10:5)

You can feel the excitement and the energy. Thus, the past is not just the past; evocation is not merely for comfort and nostalgia; memorial has power to speak to the present and release the potential of the future. This is true for us this evening as we evoke the particular past of St Patrick, a saint who brings us back to a time before our present fault lines had appeared. He reminds us of a time when things were different: what has been can be again. The tyranny of the present moment is relativized by effective memorial.

Probatio 3

So what what “effective memorial” of St Patrick look like? Where does that leave us and what can we do? We can, of course, do precisely what we are doing this evening: we gather, we cross thresholds, we trespass boundaries—whether hesitatingly or enthusiastically, gingerly or joyfully, we are all gathered, like the first Pentecost, in one place. Through the DCC and other bodies, we can befriend each other and learn to appreciate the varieties of being Christian and come to know the treasures of all the traditions. One thing we most certainly can do immediately is build together on the Word of God. Already this happens in many places, and as say Paul often advises, we should do so more and more. Not only is there nothing to lose, there is everything to gain.

Many in our society have walked away from Christ without ever having known him. Many in effect sleepwalk through life, living lives of endless distraction and unrecognised desperation. The times are a paradox: never were more people educated, never was knowledge or at least information more widely accessible; and yet, sorely lacking is knowledge of the Gospel, knowledge of Jesus and the God of compassion and mercy. Our mission territory is right here and now and there is work to be done.

A specific example of what is possible has taken place in Dublin over the last few years: the *Ecumenical Bible Week*, taking place this year from 15-22 May. With generous support, it brings together the broadest range of Christian families, to reflect through the Word of God on the issues of the day. This year’s programme is ambitious: *The Gospel and Care of our Common Home*. Of the two or three great issues of the day, this climate change surely one of them and it is not going to go away any time soon. The *Ecumenical Bible Week* is only one effort; happily, there are many others, small shoots representing a potential springtime of faith. As we all know, the regeneration of faith can have no other genesis than in the seed which is the Word of God.

Peroratio

The risk, especially in the more liturgically-minded churches, is to think that when you done your worship well you’ve done well. The prophets would not agree. Amos, from so long ago, can sound like a real Dub when he declares:

Spare me the din of your chanting,
let me hear none of your strumming on lyres,
let justice flow like water,
and uprightness like a never-failing stream! (Amos 5:23–24)

To us this evening, it serves as a sharply worded warning not to let the inspiration behind us as we leave this Cathedral. We have been inspired; we have been uplifted; we have listened, prayed and been together in the presence of God. As we leave, let us dream again and talk together to find news way to build bridges, to treasure each others’ differences and, not least, to acknowledge the real communion we already enjoy.

St Patrick himself moved from comfort to risk, from conviction to engagement, from prayer to action. We celebrate him best by undertaking again in our time *and* together the work of proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever. Amen