

Anniversary of the Apparition of Our Lady of Knock

MASS TO MARK THE OPENING OF THE ONE YEAR PROGRAMME OF PREPARATION FOR THE WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES 2018

Homily notes of Most Rev. Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin and Primate of Ireland

Shrine of Our Lady of Knock, 21st August 2017 at 3.00pm

What is faith? Who is faithful? If we look at today's Gospel reading, or indeed at the Sunday Gospel of yesterday, on both occasions Jesus rebukes his closest disciples and asks them "How is it that you have no faith". Yesterday in the Gospel, the person of faith was a woman who was considered an outsider, not just not an Israelite, but a woman who belonged to a people that would have been considered hostile to the Jewish people.

Yesterday, when the woman asked that her daughter – tormented by a devil – be cured, Jesus initially does not even reply to her. Jesus seems indifferent and waits until his disciples come and ask him to do something simply to get rid of her because they considered her to be a nuisance. In today's Gospel, going out on a lake that was renowned for its sudden storms, Jesus decides to sleep, seemingly uncaring of any risk. The disciples wake him and accuse him: "Master do you not care. We are going down". Jesus rebukes the wind and it calms, but then he rebukes his disciples because of their lack of faith.

What is faith? Faith is trust in God. Faith is trust and recognition that God cares even when we are not aware of it. Faith is not telling God what he should do for us. Faith is not a situation in which we feel we know what God should be doing. It is being sensitive to God's plan for us and to his love for us.

Many of us fail to believe because we do not understand God. We use many words to describe God. I remember the old catechism:

"Who made the World? God made the World. Who is God? God is our father in heaven, the creator and Lord of all things".

These answers are true, but they can easily be misread when we place our own narrow interpretation on the words. There is one word that we find in today's readings that we rarely use when we speak about God and it is in many ways one of the keys to really understanding who God is. What is that word: Lavish.

We look on the word lavish as meaning something superficial, humanly self-centred. Lavish clothes and lavish residences seem far from the Christian ideal. Think of the story of the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived a lavish life style. Yet as we have just heard in our first reading, Saint Paul says: "Think of the love that the father has lavished on us".

God's love is lavish and is lavished on us. Should we overlook the fact that God is the one who lavishes love on us, then we have failed to understand God. If we do not abandon ourselves to understand and be enriched by the lavishness of God's love, then we can even misinterpret any true definition of God and interpret God's power and glory in terms that are utterly worldly. We can call God lord and creator, yet if we fail to understand that God loves everything and everyone he created, then we begin to misunderstand our faith.

Does our Church appear to the men and women of our time as the place where the lavishness of God's love flourishes and touches hearts? Why do so many today say that they believe in God but not in the Church? What is it about the Church as perceived that seems to direct people away from God?

Pope Francis surprises us in so many ways with his gestures of loving care and his constant talk of God's mercy and how God's mercy reaches out to all. There are even some who feel that he is in danger of reducing the significance of God's law. Pope Francis is certainly not betraying God's law but he is reminding us that we – as individuals and as Church – can only be messengers of God's law if we reflect God's love and mercy. People will only understand God's law when they understand it to be a law of love.

Pope John XXIII at the opening of the Second Vatican Council gave a remarkable and hope-filled homily beginning with the words *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, Our Mother the Church Rejoices. He did not deny that there were errors in doctrine within the Church and that the clashes with certain elements of modern culture could indeed lead to greater confusion about doctrine. The approach of the Council, Pope John proclaimed, should however not be one just of condemnation and correction. "Nowadays", he said, "the spouse of Christ prefers to make use of the medicine of mercy rather than that of severity". These are words that Pope Francis would easily use today. God lavishes his love on us even when we turn in the wrong direction.

Today we begin a programme of catechesis that will lead us to the *World Meeting of Families* to be held in Dublin beginning of this day next year. However, what we begin today must really be something more. It is not a twelve-month programme, which will end in twelve months time. It is a call to renew the Church so that it can enter into a new future: a future in which our Church will attract more and more people to Jesus through the way in which try – however imperfectly – to realize that love of God in the way we live.

The family is one of the primary places where the encounter with the love of God and day to day life takes place. Married couples are called to enter into a path of living that reflects and incarnates in our world and in our times that lavish love of God. Passing on the faith within families is not just an intellectual exercise. Married couples pass on the faith by witnessing to the tender loving kindness of God. They do so through their mutual love as spouses – including their sexual love – and through their love of their children. Families are also called to contribute to a wider culture of loving care, which Pope Paul VI called a *civilization of love*.

While in no way rejecting the value of much of modern scientific and human progress, we know well also that our global culture is still far from being a *civilization of love*. Think just of the violence of the past week, in Spain and Finland and in Burkina Faso – but also in our own country. Think of that ongoing gangland culture of barefaced killing and vendetta which brings nothing but an empty feeling of power to the unscrupulous. However, it is a power that does not free and liberate but only leads to its perpetrators being trapped more and more into a continued cycle of violence. Think of the tragic repetition of stabbings – often for futile reasons – that kills its victims and then ruins the life of its perpetrators.

God's love reaches out to all. We have an obligation to preach the Gospel of love to all. There is no family that is ideal. Plates fly in every family. There are however great families who struggle, at times heroically. The celebration of a *World Meeting of Families* would be hypocritical were it to be a celebration that ignored this struggle. A *civilization of love* must involve the search for a new politics for families, a politics of care for the marginalised and those who struggle. Where human love fails or is imperfect, our response should not just be that of condemnation or exclusion but one of allowing the medicine of mercy to lead people towards a more perfect love.

How do we help our young people to encounter the path of faithful love as the only true path towards human happiness? How do we teach fidelity in a world where everything is disposable. God's love is lavishly faithful even when we are unfaithful. The love of married couples is called to mirror that fidelity of God. Priests and religious are also called to a witness of fidelity. Their fidelity is a witness to the God who is faithful and their fidelity encourages and strengthens families. Where priests and religious are unfaithful, their infidelity does immense harm to the witness of the Church.

We are called, as the prayer of the Mass of Our Lady of Knock reminded us, to be witnesses to the "God [who] gives hope to his people in time of distress". We come now to anoint this Icon that will be a central inspiration in all our preparations for the *World Meeting of Families* as we set out on a journey of ecclesial renewal to rediscover that Joy of Love, *Amoris Laetitia*, which is God's great gift to us and which we are called to share with all these around us.

The message of Knock is itself an Icon, an Icon of the Church. The Saints, led by Mary, the model of discipleship, with John the evangelist and teacher and Joseph the protector of the Church indicate the sacrificial Table of the Lord, the great moment of salvation when in his total self-giving love, Jesus reveals the true nature of our God.

We pray that under the inspiration of this Icon as it journeys around our country, more and more of us will be drawn to contemplate the infinite compassion of Jesus for all the concerns of marriage and family life in the world of today and tomorrow. We pray that many, especially young people, will be drawn to experience the liberating power of the Joy of Love *Amoris Laetitia*, truly as Good News.