



PASTORAL MESSAGE FROM BISHOP NOEL TREANOR

KINDLING HOPE IN TIMES OF FEAR AND ANXIETY

ADVENT 2020

Advent 2020 is upon us. For the coming year on Sundays we shall listen for the most part to extracts from St Mark's gospel. On occasion we shall hear variations on Jesus' words, "*Do not be afraid!*" (Mk 6.50) in regard to events before and after the resurrection. Fear and its cousin, anxiety, have stalked all ages of humanity.

If COVID-19 has disrupted life worldwide, its impact has increased anxiety levels for many. In different ways, people feel fearful and anxious like the disciples in the storm-tossed boat with the wind blowing hard against them (Mk 6.48).

As we enter this Advent in lockdown, fear is in the air. There is the fear of becoming infected with COVID-19, or of infecting others. We are fearful for family and loved ones, for those who work in our Health Service, Hospitals and Care Homes. Such fear is genuine.

Channelled creatively in response to the facts about our extraordinary situation, such fear can be transformed at least partially into personal choices and forms of public action which respond to the threat and open furrows of hope.

Beyond and below our fears, many also feel a deep-down anxiety about life and the future. Uncertainty, compounded by the pandemic, seems to hover around us and even within us. What will the future be like? Who is shaping our destinies as persons, communities, societies in this cyber age? What is the future of work for our children in this rapidly developing digital age and culture? What economic, political and societal impact will COVID and BREXIT unleash? Can the democratic system, political parties, systems of public governance, adapt and respond to the emerging culture? Have they the capacities to pursue their service of justice, human rights and peace in an ever more intertwined and interdependent world confronted with existential challenges for justice, the survival of life itself and for human identity and dignity? In the face of such concerns for the human condition, fear for the future, and the deeper malaise of anxiety, can cripple, if not paralyse, the ability to hope.

Evidently, easy, ready-made answers to these crucial issues do not exist. Yet, we also see efforts and so much public investment in trying to address global challenges, rectify failure, injustice and to promote the public good. In the face of such efforts it is of course easy and sometimes tempting to choose cynicism, to see 'smoke and mirrors', where such is not the case, and thus to demoralise unjustifiably rather than promote a healthy and constructive civic spirit.

Throughout history, in the face of momentous crises and moral failures, even and alas on the part of Christians, our faith communities have seen the light of hope in the lives of prophetic figures and martyrs. They have witnessed to hope through endurance, resilience inspired by their faith in Christ, the Son of God. In every generation such beacons of integrity and hope remind us that '*God places his eye*' in our hearts (Sir 17.8).

That eye empowers us to rise to the hope that St Paul writes of in his letter to the Romans: *'so then, now that we have been justified by faith, we are at peace with God, through our Lord Jesus Christ; it is through him, by faith, that we have been admitted into God's favour in which we are living, and look forward exultantly to God's glory. Not only that ; let us exult, too, in our hardships, understanding that hardship develops perseverance, and perseverance develops a tested character, something that gives us hope, and a hope which will not let us down, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us'* (Rom 5.1-6).

Over recent months many have put these words of faith into action in countless ways: those who have assisted the dying, those Hospital Chaplains who have prayed with the sick and dying, those who have launched, supplied and worked in Food Banks, those who have delivered food to housebound and vulnerable neighbours and friends, the sports clubs and their members who have organised outreaches of care.

As we enter the season of Advent, let's take to ourselves the deep import of those words of St Paul so that hope may sprout and grow resilience, endurance and care for others in our hearts. The circle of the Advent wreath, evocative of the eternal, and bearing green foliage in anticipation of new life, invites us into a process of re-discovering the ever-rejuvenating dynamic of Christian faith. The dynamic of the new life of faith in Christ is presented to us in the Scriptures, celebrated in the Eucharist and the sacraments and lived out in our care and respect for others and creation.

This God-given hope unleashed in history in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is a delicate blossom of surprising power. Of this hope Charles Péguy, a French poet, wrote lines¹ we might also contemplate as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Saviour:

*What surprises me, God says, is hope
And I can't get over it
The fledgling hope who seems like nothing at all
This little girl hope
Immortal*

*It is hope that is difficult
And the easy way - the tendency to despair
That's the great temptation ...*

*Hope loves what will be
In time and for eternity
In the future, so to say, of eternity itself ...*

The faith I love best, God says, is hope

May this season of Advent kindle that 'little girl', hope, in our hearts, so that we may see life with that eye placed in our hearts by God, Creator and Redeemer.

+ Noel Treanor

Bishop of Down and Connor

¹ Le porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu