

1st Sunday of Advent (C)
(Jeremiah 33:14-16 / Luke 21:25-28. 34-36)
02.12.2018

We find a word in both Scripture readings heard this morning, one which I would like to propose as a word to enlighten and guide our paths for our Advent journey – both at a personal and at community level. The word is *confidence*.

Confidence is a great gift. It is a precious quality.

For many reasons – some of them very evident – confidence is something that is becoming scarce in today's world and in the Church.

While we often employ the word *confidence* in Christian discourse, we rarely take the time to unpack its meaning. While I won't pretend to offer a complete unpacking of the word *confidence* in my reflection this morning, I will attempt to propose a few small thoughts in regard to the call addressed to us both by the prophet Jeremiah and Jesus: the call to *dwell in confidence*, the call to *stand with confidence* before the Lord and each other.

The confidence asked of God's People – especially in the Old Testament writings – amounted to an invitation to put their trust in God, in the certitude that, trusting Him they would find strength, support, security, safety: *a rock; a sure place of refuge; a stronghold in time of distress*.

The confidence of which the Old Testament writers speak is fundamentally a sense of assurance, born of deep trust in the Lord's promise that He will look after His people.

Today we are being called to be confident that the Lord is looking after each one of us and all of us together.

The Hebrew Bible's key word for *confidence* is *batah*. This Hebrew word conveys all that I have just been suggesting and more.

In the New Testament one of the Greek words – the most commonly used – which we interpret as *confidence* is *parresia*; this Greek word conveys a similar idea to the Hebrew word *batah*, but it also suggests a kind of *openness of heart, a frankness, facilitated by clarity of speech*. It hints at a certain *boldness and/or courage*.

There can be little doubt that we need confidence of mind and heart at this time – in all the senses I have outlined – not only in the life of our precarious world, but also, and, above all, in the life of our deeply wounded, suffering and greatly destabilised Church.

At a time when the Church can appear to us to be in peril, at a time when things are really strained in some places, to the point where they may even appear to us to be falling apart altogether, we need trust in God more than ever; we need to believe that the Lord is somehow holding us and all things in His hands and that He will see us through. At a time when we feel the very existence of the Church to be under threat, we need to know that we can take refuge in the Lord and rest assured that He is looking after us; that He will not abandon or forsake us. We need what the Hebrew language calls *batah*.

At this moment in the Church's history we also need great courage. Moreover, I am convinced that it is vital for us to be simple, frank, open, honest, plain-speaking in our dealings with each other and the wider world; ready to admit to and face up to the challenges confronting us – daring to do this with a certain boldness. What the Greek language calls *parresia* is required of us.

I find it striking that the contexts in which both Jeremiah and Jesus spoke of *confidence* in today's Scripture readings were truly challenging ones.

The context of our own day and age – this time in which I suggest we hold on to the word *confidence*, hoping and trusting in the Lord's call to *stand before Him fearlessly* – is also a greatly challenging period in the Church's history.

Given how things are for the Church right across the world – including here in Ireland, in our own Diocese of Dromore, as elsewhere in the Church Universal – it is understandable that many people (good faithful People of God) are feeling lost and disheartened, fearful and discouraged. All so easily, anxiety can grip us and with it a spirit of timidity which leads to a quasi-paralysis, a readiness to shy away from, rather than face up to, the challenges before us. In the midst of all that has befallen us as Church – overcome as we are with shock, humiliation and sometimes near despair – we must remember that we are still God's People to whom the mission has been confided to proclaim the Good News and bear witness to Christ and His gospel.

Maybe one of the mysterious graces of things having fallen apart in the life of the Church, to the extent that they have, is to help us realise in whom we are called to place our trust, upon whom our confidence should be founded, as God's People.

Perhaps a risk, a temptation, a danger, for many people hitherto – at a time when all was apparently, (but not really) going well – was to place their trust in something, rather than someone... something that seemed to hold everything together: a strong institutional Church. I suspect many did this to the deficit of placing their confidence and trust, hope and expectation in the person of Jesus Christ... Jesus Christ who animates the life of His Mystical Body in surprising ways – showing a readiness to espouse poverty, weakness and vulnerability in order to make Himself manifest to the world, rather than to vest Himself with riches, honour and might, or to robe Himself in power, prestige and privilege. These latter attitudes are futile sources of earthly pride; they may give us a false security, but, all so easily, they can blind us to the truth and cause us to lose our way.

Very clearly, the confidence to which the word of God calls us is not to be found in human strength. The psalmist cries out: *Put not your trust in princes, in mortal men, in whom there is no help... Put not your trust in horses or chariots.* As for the prophet Jeremiah, at one point, he proclaims: *The Lord says: Cursed and disappointed is the man who puts his confidence and trust in mortal man and turns his heart away from God. He is like a stunted shrub in the desert, with no hope for the future; he lives on salt-encrusted plains in the barren wilderness; good times pass him by forever. But blessed is the one who puts his trust in the Lord and has made the Lord his hope and confidence.* (Jeremiah 17) What is to be retained from the prophet Jeremiah's insight shared with us here is that anyone who places his or her confidence solely in human strength, and certainly in his or her own resources alone, will be sorely disappointed at the end of the day. The call addressed to us to *stand with confidence before the Lord* bids us to set aside all deceptive self-reliance and/or every over-reliance upon other people's human wisdom – however smart our own or others' strategies may appear, or how great our own or others' strength seem to be. The call to *stand in confidence before the Lord* invites us to trust in God above all else and before every other person. The Wisdom writer puts it this way: *Trust in the Lord completely; don't ever trust yourself alone. In everything you do, put God first, and He will direct you and crown your efforts with success.* (Proverbs 3) *Human wisdom must not be the primary reservoir of Christian confidence.* This is a point Paul makes forcibly in his writings. For the apostle, God's wisdom and His strength are not of the same order as ours; our wisdom and strength are not of the same order as God's. The primary source of our confidence, as Christians, is the Lord Jesus Christ Himself – at least should be. *In God I trust* could be/should be our motto. For his part, speaking of his

faith in Jesus Christ, Paul declares quite simply: *I know the One in whom I have placed my trust.* (2 Timothy 1.)

All too often we are tempted to think that self-confidence is enough to bring us through, but, self-confidence alone, however important it may be, is never sufficient. Indeed, we find that when we begin to rely on ourselves alone, usually what happens is that we are led to stumble and fall. I believe this is an important part of God's pedagogy; He wants to protect us from ourselves, from our puffed up pride. When we get too smart for our own good, the Lord finds ways to call us to order. Our experience shows us that we can bring ourselves only so far. When we get on our high horse – imagining that we are doing very well on our own – we are quickly dashed to the ground; something intervenes that floors us. Thankfully so! That we find ourselves humiliated by our fall – born of arrogance and pride – is, in fact, a grace. It brings us back to where we should have always remained – humbly dependent upon the Lord. The Wisdom literature of the Bible keeps reminding us of this... and yet, time and time again, we forget this great truth. As the psalmist says: *In his riches, man lacks wisdom.* The Book of Proverbs echoes the psalmist's words when he states: *Trust in your money and down you go! Trust in God and flourish like a tree!* (Proverbs 11). Trust is to be given to God, as Jeremiah suggests when he declares: *Blessed the man who trusts in the Lord and has made the Lord his hope and confidence. He is like a tree planted along a riverbank, with its roots reaching deep into the water – a tree not bothered by the heat nor worried by long months of drought. Its leaves stay green, and it goes on producing luscious fruit* (Jeremiah 17). These words of the prophet have parallels in the Psalms of David.

In the New Testament, Jesus addresses the whole issue of confidence and trust in chapter 12 of Luke's gospel. In His teaching contained therein, Jesus places great emphasis upon the importance of boldness, tempered by humility. With boldness Christ's disciples are to turn to God for His gracious help; depending exclusively upon the Lord, trusting Him to look after all that is beyond our control.

Whatever trust we place in others should clearly be rooted in and subject to the trust we place in God.

If, as the psalmist proclaims, we are not to put our trust *in princes, in mortal men in whom there is no help*, this does not mean that we are not to show any trust whatsoever in other people. It is to be hoped that in all our lives there are and will be people in whom we can have confidence, people whom we can trust: one's spouse, family members, friends, brothers and sisters in community, confidants to whom we turn for counsel etc. In the Church we should be able to have confidence in the Church's ministers and others to whom we are called to entrust ourselves. One of the great wounds and terrible tragedies of our time is that relationships with those people with whom we should be able to share what is going on in our lives has been damaged by the fear of a possible violation of trust – a fear rooted in the sad experiences of so many who have been disappointed and let down by people who should have cared for them, including clergy and Religious, men and women who should have honoured and respected those confided to them, but who failed to do so.

Bonds of sacred trust have been betrayed and as a result confidence has been lost among many in the life of the Church. It happens that even one Church minister doesn't quite trust another. We often hear testimonies to the effect that the confidence which should be the hallmark of relationships between bishops and priests, priests and bishops, has been damaged to a large extent. The Church is all the poorer because of this.

In the New Testament we find Paul addressing this delicate problem of a breakdown of confidence among fellow-Christians in his Second Letter to the Corinthians and in his Letter to the Galatians. In 2 Corinthians we see Paul ready to renew his trust in people who have

disappointed him, while in Galatians he says to those who have been *troubled and confused by the interference of false brothers* that they should *come back to trust in the Lord*. (2 Cor 1 & Gal 5)

In another Pauline text – the Letter he wrote to Philemon – the apostle despatched the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon, pleading with Philemon to give this runaway slave – someone who had proved himself not worthy of trust in the past – a second chance. In his Letter to Philemon, Paul vouched for Onesimus. I find it striking that Paul himself should have taken the risk of trusting and recommending Onesimus, even though he knew that this man had let his master down in the past. The confidence Paul displayed in regard to Onesimus no doubt did more to heal the infidelity of this runaway slave than any mistrust Paul would have held in his heart around him. Admittedly, Paul's attitude was not without risk, but the apostle esteemed the chance he took a risk worth taking.

Maybe there is an invitation here for some of us who might be tempted to give up hope altogether to dare to *hang in there* and give things – to give the Church, to give people who have disappointed us and/or others in the Church – another chance.

The confidence Jesus asked of those to whom He addressed His words in today's gospel was asked of them in extreme circumstances. It is in extreme circumstances that confidence is asked of us today. Can we, will we, dare to trust?

In many ways the present state of the Church can appear to us to be hopeless, dire even, but it would be a total contradiction of our Christian faith if we were to give up on hope altogether. The apostle encourages us to *hope against all hope*. *Hope against all hope* challenges us to dare to believe in the possibility for God to intervene in the most unlikely places and in ways that will surprise us – in manners beyond all our imagining. *Hope against all hope* – to hold on to confidence and trust in the circumstances in which we find ourselves as Church today, in the midst of the current crisis, at a time which is so profoundly disturbing and deeply troubling – demands great courage. Only with the eyes of faith can we see what we are going through as Church right now as a moment of opportunity and even, strangely, an occasion of grace – a time when possibilities are opened for a renewed and revitalised Church to emerge, a purified and cleansed Church to be brought forth.

The present crisis challenges us to speak honestly and courageously, with that boldness which is one of the meanings of the word used to express confidence in the Greek employed in the New Testament. But just to speak – however boldly – is not enough. We also need to listen. Now more than ever in the Church we must engage in a process of honest and frank dialogue. Partners in dialogue engage themselves in a process of mutual listening as much as they talk to each other.

In his Letter to the Catholics of Ireland in 2010, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of how he had *listened to those he invited to Rome to speak of the crisis being experienced by the Church* in this land. He emphasised that *the discussions engaged in were frank*. He saw this as something constructive, giving hope for the way forward. He listened before he spoke. His Letter to the Church in Ireland was the result of a listening exercise.

Pope Francis has also strongly emphasised the importance for the Church to listen before she speaks on the terrible ill of abuse which has so deeply afflicted and so terribly weakened the life of the Church. After having listened to people and heard their stories (the delegation of victims from Chile, for example), Pope Francis has humbly acknowledged what went wrong in the past and expressed not only repentance, but a firm resolve to see things change for the better. He has voiced what was passed over in silence hitherto, spoken of what was left

untended when and where Christ's healing word and touch should have been applied by the Church.

In the words they addressed to the Church in Ireland and that of the wider world, both these popes have stressed how important it is for all of us as God's People to engage ourselves in a spirit of solidarity in the way of conversion. Only such radical change will bring about the restoration of confidence and trust which is required to lead us to to experience a renewed climate of confident communion in the Church.

I have often spoken from this pulpit of the fact that in practically every encounter I ever had with the late fr. Roger Schutz of Taizé he came back to one word – the word which I suggested we take to heart as the guiding light to give us a sense of direction for this Advent: the word **confidence**.

Let me draw this reflection to a close first by quoting a few words of the late fr. Roger and then a prayer he composed which I believe to be particularly relevant texts for us as Church today: *When tirelessly the Church listens and reconciles, it becomes what it is as its most luminous – a communion of love, of compassion, of consolation, a clear reflection of the Risen Christ... Never distant, never on the defensive, freed from all harshness, the Church can radiate the humble trusting of faith into our human hearts...* In the light of these words, he formulated the following prayer: *Jesus our peace, You never abandon us. Your Holy Spirit opens a way forward, the way which consists in casting ourselves into God as into the depths. And astonishment arises; these depths are not an abyss of darkness; they are God-fathomless depths of compassion and innocence... Come, O Christ, and **fill us with quiet confidence**; make us realise that Your love will never disappoint, and that to follow You means giving our lives.* Let us make that prayer our own -especially the plea: **Fill us with quiet confidence**.

As the prophet Jeremiah encouraged us to in today's first reading, like Israel, may we *dwell in confidence, trusting in The Lord-our-integrity*; as today's gospel further exhorted us, may we *Stay awake, praying for the strength to survive all that has happened and is going to happen, and to stand with confidence before the Son of Man.*

Amen!