

Anniversary of the Dedication of the Monastic Church of Holy Cross Monastery  
1<sup>st</sup> Day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity  
(Eph 2:19-22 / Jn 4:19-24)  
18.01.2019

Today we celebrate the anniversary of this church and the opening of our Monastery of the Holy Cross. It is a day charged with memories for those of us who lived those events in 2004. Memory is something different to nostalgia. In the Bible *memory* not only looks back, it also looks ahead – and it looks both ways from the now. Those who remember well are people who are properly situated in the actual moment; they see the past brought present and the future already anticipated in hope.

It is important to use a day like today to take stock: to remember where we have come from, while daring to look to the future – albeit that this future is entirely unknown to us. As regards the future, the only thing we can be sure of is that *the Lord who has called us is faithful*. He has brought us safe thus far and He most certainly has a plan which includes a future for us. The words of the prophet Jeremiah come to mind: *‘I know the plans I have for you’, says the Lord. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and hope’*. This prophetic pronouncement assures us that the Lord’s hand is laid upon us; it comforts us, giving us confidence. It reminds us that the Lord can be trusted to lead and guide us according to His will – which is always a way of life! God will do this for the greater good of His Holy Church, bearing in mind the salvation of the world, for, He never thinks of the Church as cut off from the rest of humanity, for the Church’s mission is to bear witness to Christ’s presence in the world. Clearly, we should never think of ourselves as somehow cut off from those around us! What we live as Church Universal and as particular Christian communities has an impact on the whole of society.

While what we commemorate today is the dedication of a church building – this beautiful sacred space in which we worship – what we celebrate is more than the assemblage of bricks and mortar and the many other materials used to form and embellish this edifice. Admittedly, a church’s architecture is important and we can rejoice in its beauty, but this is not what counts most. The building is not what we celebrate. When it comes to *God’s House of Prayer* what matters above all else are its *living stones*. The *spiritual edifice* primes over any physical construction. It is good for us to be reminded of this today as we look around us and consider the surroundings in which we are privileged to live and celebrate the sacred liturgy day after day. What we should really be considering in our celebration today is the responsibility that goes with living and worshipping here. In saying that, I evidently think primarily of our monastic community’s privilege and responsibility, but I also consider that of many other people who are united with us as well. I believe it can be said that, in a certain sense, Holy Cross Monastery is not just the dwelling place of the monks who reside here. This monastery is more than just a complex of buildings or even the ensemble of the monastic community who are housed here. I think it is important that we also bear in mind what could be referred to as the *muntir* of Holy Cross: that’s to say, the wider spiritual family which gathers around the monks: the many people who find a spiritual home here. When we talk of our monastery, the *muntir*, there are our oblates, our benefactors and our friends; there are those who regularly come to worship with us in this place, as well as those who do so only occasionally; there are also all those people who simply halt in this church building for a moment – taking *time out* for quiet recollection – that may be perhaps just a few instants for personal prayer. It is all these people who are *the Church*. I see them all as *the living stones* of this *House of Prayer for all peoples*. It is the whole multitude of *God’s Holy Faithful People* who are the Church, the mystical *Body of Christ*. It is for all of them that we give

thanks as we commemorate *the Dedication* of this monastic building – as indeed any edifice erected to the glory of God and for His People’s assembly therein.

At the very heart of everything – and every one – being celebrated today, what matters most is Christ. I repeat: what matters most is **Christ!** *Christ in our midst!*

In my biblical reflection this morning I will concentrate on the few lines from Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians proclaimed in our first reading. Let me begin by situating this short text in the wider context of Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. In the passage heard this morning the message is clear. The apostle wants the Ephesians – and all those who will receive this Letter after them – to recognise not only their belonging to God, but also their vital – what should literally be, their truly life-giving – relationship with each other. Paul reminds his readers that they are *no longer strangers to God or foreigners to heaven, but members of God’s own family, citizens of God’s country*, with all of them having their *place in God’s household with every other Christian* – as one translation puts it. Note, the emphasis *upon every other Christian!* That’s an important reminder; one we need to hear on this first day of the *Week of Prayer for the Unity of All Christians*.

To understand Paul’s concern for the Ephesians, we must remember that the Church in Ephesus had been planted by Paul’s influence. First mention of Paul’s role in this local Church is found in chapter 18 of the Acts of the Apostles. We are told how Paul arrived at the port of Ephesus during one of his missionary journeys and how *he made a short preliminary visit with the people there – beginning with the Jews in the local synagogue*. It is explained that the apostle couldn’t dally long in Ephesus first time round, because *he was headed for the Festival at Jerusalem*. But, Paul promised the Ephesians that he would return to them soon, God willing. Clearly, the Lord permitted it and Paul kept his promise. A little later in the Acts of the Apostles we learn that Paul came and lived for an extended period at Ephesus serving as the Church’s pastor. We read in Acts 19 how during that time – his long sojourn – *Paul preached to the community daily*. This went on for a few years. For Luke to add in this little note: *So everyone in the Turkish province of Asia Minor – both Jews and Greeks – heard the Lord’s message*. It is significant that Paul’s words touched all; everyone in the province – both Jews and Greeks. In our Northern Irish context that would be comparable to saying that every section of our divided society benefited from one person’s ministry; that Christians from right across the denominational divide were touched by one person’s preaching and proclamation of the gospel message. This is something we try to pursue and seek to facilitate as a community here at Holy Cross – not just as congregated individuals, but as a community; it is something we can rejoice in as having happened, and as continually happening. Our community’s testimony has an impact far beyond its small number. Many from right across the board congregate here: the *muntir* of Holy Cross is made up of Christians drawn from across the Churches.

Paul’s love for the Church in Ephesus is brought to our attention by the author of Acts in a little verse found in chapter 20 which records Paul’s words to those he served there: *Remember the three years I was with you – my constant watch-care over you night and day and my many tears for you*.

If Paul greatly loved the Christians of Ephesus, there can be little doubt about their reciprocal affection for him. The Ephesians had a profound gratitude for and a great spiritual attachment to Paul. The Acts of the Apostles relates movingly *how touched the people were* when the time came for Paul to go elsewhere out of fidelity to God’s call upon his life and in response to the new mission confided to him. We are told how when the time came for the apostle’s departure *they wept openly*. We read: *When he had finished speaking, he knelt and prayed with them, and they wept aloud as they embraced him in farewell*.

On leaving Ephesus, we can imagine Paul held an on-going concern for this Church since he had planted it and loved it with the affection a father. It is a father who gives a child its identity. Evidently, Paul would forever hold close to his paternal heart the Church of Ephesus – which he considered to be and spoke of as his *beloved child*. In regard to the Ephesians, the apostle would hold not only the love of a father, but something of the *pathos* of a mother for her offspring. In his famous *Prayer to St Paul* St Anselm thinks of the apostle as holding in his heart and displaying by his actions not only the attention of a benevolent father, but also the care and consideration of an affectionate mother. He prays: *Among Christians you were like a nurse, who not only cared for her sons, but in some way brought them forth a second time, with careful and marvellous tenderness.* Anselm speaks of *the caress of Paul's compassionate touch* which reveals the loving attention of God the Father for His children. Anselm exclaims: *O, St Paul, where is he that was called the nurse of the faithful, caressing his sons? Who is that affectionate mother who declares everywhere that she is in labour for her sons? Sweet nurse, sweet mother!* (Note Anselm's passage from the masculine pronoun to the feminine pronoun there.) Follows a long section in Anselm's prayer wherein he talks both to Paul and of Paul as a *mother* – likening Paul's motherhood qualities to those of Jesus who spoke of Himself in the gospels as a mother. You may recall how Jesus declared the sentiments of His heart in regard to His own people to be akin to those of *a mother hen who would want to gather her brood under her wings*. Jesus avowed that if only His people would allow Him to do so He would gather them as a hen gathers her chicks! Anselm's *Prayer to St Paul* is probably one of the most famous texts of Christian spirituality ever penned about *the motherhood of God* which is a quality which every Christian pastor (man or woman) is meant to manifest in their ministry lived in the service of God's People.

Paul's great concern for the Ephesians – like that of every parent (father or mother) – was the survival and well-being of those he had engendered to the Christian life. Paul was aware of the challenges facing the Ephesians. He wondered how this community, which he loved so dearly, could survive the long haul without his presence. He saw the Ephesians' great potential, but he did so without in any way ignoring this Christian community's fragility.

In the section of Paul's Letter to the Church in Ephesus read this morning, Paul reminds his readers that they have to *place their faith in the only solid foundation for their life in God*: stressing that this *solid foundation is the person of Jesus Christ!* The apostle insists upon all the members of the community of Ephesus being *carefully joined together with Christ and with each other, in Christ, as parts of a beautiful and constantly growing temple for God*. He reminds them: *You are joined with Him (Christ) and with each other by the Spirit and all together are part of this dwelling place of God.*

Can we not read in those words a message for our community here at Holy Cross? We are called to be united to Christ and with each other as *living stones* of this *House of Prayer for all Peoples* – a House in which *all can find their home*. We show this to be possible by our being situated as *living stones who are properly adjusted to one another, perfectly aligned on the corner stone who is Christ*.

A little further on in his Letter to the Ephesians Paul talks about how *those who belong to Christ* – about how we – *are a single body* and should function as such. Each member is to be *filled full with Christ*. This notion of forming *unum corpus, one body*, is central to our particular Olivetan spirituality and is rooted in Benedict's strong words found more than once in his *Rule for Monks* that *we are to prefer nothing whatsoever to Christ*. (We heard those words in our daily Chapter meeting this morning in our reading of that section of the Rule entitled *On the Tools of Good Works*.) We are to be *filled full with Christ!*

Our belonging to Christ should inform – that's to say that it should shape and form – both our internal life, as individual persons, and our whole life together as a community of believers.

Christ must be central to what we live in this place. Each one of us must see our self as necessary to Christ and to each other for the fulfilment of Christ's mission which we are called to pursue for the good of the whole Church and the wider world in which we are called to testify to *the hope which is within us*.

When we situate ourselves before the Lord and others in this way – *in Christ* – then, like Jesus, our whole desire is to do *only the Father's will*. We humbly recognise that we are asked to *do whatever is required of us* relying on the help of God and the power of His grace at work within us. None of us has within himself or herself alone the strength or the resources needed to initiate or sustain anything of lasting value. If whatever we undertake is to be successful and bear fruit, it must be *God's work within us*; His work realised through us. To quote from *the Rule* once again: *With a most instant prayer we must ask the Lord to bring what we have begun to perfection*.

The important thing for us is to have confidence that God has a plan for us. We must trust that the Lord sees how we fit into His scheme of things – even when we still can't quite see that for ourselves.

In God's vision, *we are all parts of a body in which every member is needed for the proper working, ordering, health and well-being of the whole*.

The words of today's first reading are an exhortation addressed to each one of us this morning.

Of course, I hear them to have a special significance for the monastic community gathered in this place – given the day on which we listen to them. By reminding us that we belong to Christ, and to each other, and that God dwells within us, they encourage us. They assure us that the Lord is here and is made manifest in the life we share. They recall to us that we have a communal vocation; that it is together that we are called to bear witness to the Lord by living faithfully the parable of communion which is our community life.

*The jointing together of all believers* – as one translation puts it – is an on-going process which should be understood as including all who are in Christ: wherever they are, whoever they are, whatever their background. It is all together that *we are called to form one body, one temple, a living edifice, that God inhabits right now*.

*God's temple* of which the apostle Paul speaks in our first reading – and to which Christ refers in today's gospel passage, in His conversation with the Samaritan woman – is clearly not to be confined to any one physical space; it is *a spiritual temple*. We don't have to go to only one place of worship to *worship the Lord in truth*. We can conclude from Jesus' statement that *the true Church* is not to be found only in a physical space, or any one confine, but in *right worship*. The woman from Samaria told Jesus that Samaritans worshipped on their mountain, Mount Gerazim, instead of Jerusalem. Jesus' words to her in response to this remark are to be noted: *Woman, believe me, an hour is coming when neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father... But an hour is coming and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for such people the Father seeks to be His worshippers*. These gospel words are to be taken into consideration with the final line of the Pauline text read this morning if they are to make sense: *You are also being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit*.

The point to be grasped is this: God dwells within us. He has made His home in the fragile human beings we are, with the imperfections that are ours. This is an assurance we are called to hold on to. What great potential and encouragement we find therein. What confidence is given to us in the knowledge that it is so. An awesome power is available to us, if only we dare to believe in the trust that the Lord dares to place in each one of us and in the body we form together.

May we be awakened afresh on this day to a consciousness of Christ's presence in our midst – to His presence within us. Elsewhere Paul gives us great hope when he tells us that *the Lord is capable of doing in and through us far over and beyond anything we could ever imagine possible.*

Let us renew our belief in the Lord's promises on this great day, asking Him to do within us and through us whatever He wills.