

130TH ANNIVERSARY OF APPARITIONS AT KNOCK IRELAND

FINAL DAY OF NATIONAL NOVENA

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

SATURDAY 22ND AUGUST 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege for me to be here with you today preaching on this final gathering of the National Novena – this year marking in a special way the 130th Anniversary of the Apparitions at Knock.

One of the major lessons of Knock is that **lesson of silence** – no words were spoken by the apparitions nor indeed heard by those who had gathered at the gable end of this parish church in Knock; no words were needed – quite simply because our Blessed Lady and the Saints simply united with the suffering people of that time as a most distinguished and heavenly **“seed of hope”**.

And that is what has been happening here over the past 130 years whether the pilgrim has been a Pope from Rome or the most humble pilgrim from the remotest area of Ireland. A witness to hope is given and hopefully the seeds of hope have been sown in those who have come here.

SCRIPTURE READINGS:

I know that your silence has been evident during the talks already given in this series covering a wide area of life in our Church and in our world. Hope for the broken and the wounded – to hope for the sick and suffering; hope for the family – as well as hope for the individual; hope at times of bereavement and loss – and hope for our young people today; hope for the Priesthood – and now for myself a more general subject; “Seeds of hope in the Church and in the world”.

On this occasion too I ask you to continue to listen – as you have been listening to the words of sacred scripture which have been proclaimed for us at this Mass.

Basic to all of my words on this occasion I see important when considering the title of my talk “Seeds of Hope in the Church and in the World” those words of Jesus quoted in St Mark’s Gospel when he speaks of that growth of the Kingdom of God. There we are told by Jesus:

“A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know!”

I assure you that at this very moment, and every moment of our own lives as individuals or as members of the Church and of the world that growth of the Kingdom of God continues. Remember those words of Jesus: “How – we do not know!”

SEEDS OF HOPE IN THE CHURCH:

At this present time the cynic might say it is extremely difficult to find any seeds of hope in the Church – in Ireland as in so many other countries throughout the world. Around us we might be aware of the lack of vocations to the Priesthood and to the Religious life; we can see churches with only a fraction of the congregation which they formerly had; we know of the evils committed by

members of the Church in various positions of responsibility and the way in which the faith of so many people has been destroyed; and we know we can no longer fulfil our missionary role as before throughout the world.

We might ask: “Where are the seeds of hope here?”.

First of all I would say that as Christians we **must of course be people linked closely with the crucified Lord**. Jesus came on earth to teach us something of the path of suffering and death. But we must remember that our Christian religion is a religion of hope, a religion of hope in the risen Christ, a religion of hope in the resurrection, a religion in which we hope for that new life not only here on earth but in the life hereafter.

The first and most important seed of hope which we must have in our lives is that of realising the **value of our prayer**. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in his Encyclical on hope:

“The first essential setting for learning hope is prayer. When no one listens to me anymore, God still listens to me. When I can no longer talk to anyone or call upon anyone, I can always talk to God”.

I had the privilege of having in my home a few years ago Archbishop Aloysius Jin Luxian, the Jesuit Bishop of Shanghai who was also in solitary confinement for a period of some nineteen out of twenty seven years imprisonment. He said to me very simply in my own home and when I was able to meet him in his Diocese in China just two years ago: “In prison we had no means of prayer, no bible to read, no Mass to celebrate – but we still had contact with God in our hearts. We learned to pray in our heart to God Our Father”.

And just earlier this year in Burma visiting scenes of desolation after Cyclone Nargis and speaking to survivors I was struck by one man who had lost everything he possessed including the most precious possession of his family – he said it was then that he realised that he must be cast on God alone.

The basic seeds of our hope in the Church is **our prayer**, linked with the sacraments and our daily, our weekly, our regular contact with the living Jesus Christ in his Church especially in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

And following on these contacts with Christ, the basic hope we have in the Church we realise something more of the **wonder of our vocation as Christians** whether bishop or priest, religious or lay, young or old. Perhaps one of the most stirring calls of the late Pope John Paul II was that which he issued to the lay people of the world following on the Synod of Bishops of the laity. Then the Pope uttered a stirring call to the lay people throughout the world saying: “Remember, you have an exalted vocation, and there are many and varied forms of mission open to you!”

Now is no time to be steeped in any sort of depression or despair – the seed of hope is sown in the life of every Christian in the Sacrament of Baptism making him a member of the Church, a member of Christ and we must be prepared to respond to the growth of that seed within us, as Jesus said: “How we do not know” - but ready to admit the reality of our growth in Christ day by day.

SEEDS OF HOPE IN THE WORLD:

It is perhaps when we consider the situation in our world at this present time that we realise the need for ever greater hope. We think of the **poverty** so often in the midst of our cities and towns – while aware of the ever greater poverty in the world at large with millions of people suffering from

hunger and thirst and many innocent children dying each day of starvation and from lack of health care. We are aware of the **ongoing wars** in so many parts of the world with devastation being caused in country after country with needless loss of life. We are aware of the billions of pounds being spent on **increasing armaments** including nuclear weapons when a fraction of that money would provide for the needs of the greater majority of those who are suffering in so many ways throughout the world. And we know of the world – wide recession affecting us all in so many ways when our very livelihoods are at risk.

Perhaps we are also aware of the **loss of moral standards** in our own countries within these islands. When we look back on our own lives we realise the standards which our parents and grandparents tried to hand on to us – and we witness with shock not only the standards followed by so many in the world of today but those same standards being legislated for by those in positions of responsibility in our governments both local, national and international.

However it is indeed up to the Christian to still have those seeds of hope and to spread those seeds wherever they must be sown.

I mentioned the present Pope's encyclical on hope – can I now refer to his first encyclical entitled "The Sacrament of Love". There Pope Benedict XVI gives us a stirring reminder of our own task in the world to cultivate those seeds of hope when he states:

"The first and fundamental mission that we receive from the sacred mysteries we celebrate is that of **bearing witness by our lives**. The wonder we experience at the gift God has made to us in Christ gives new impulse to our lives and commits us to becoming **witnesses of his love**. We become witnesses when, through our actions, words and way of being, Another makes himself present".

I think the realisation must be coming to us all now that it is **we ourselves who must be seeds of hope in the world at this present time**. It is part of our responsibility to make Jesus Christ present not only in ourselves but in others – and we must convey something of our own inspiring Christian vision to others.

CONCLUSION:

Here in this shrine of Our Blessed Lady at Knock we surely must have before us Our Lady under that most beautiful of titles "Star of the Sea". It was in a hymn composed in the 8th or 9th century, and thus for over 1,000 years, that the Church has greeted Mary the Mother of God under this very beautiful title.

As we ourselves journey through our lives we must realise that basic responsibility of ours which is to cultivate the seeds of hope planted in us in the Sacrament of Baptism, and nourished through our daily prayer with regular reception of the sacraments. It is our Christian responsibility to spread those seeds of hope wherever there is need leaving it to Christ himself to see to the growth of those seeds.

And all must be done under the inspiration of that "Star of the Sea" whose life was a life filled with hope in Almighty God and in his love and care for her.

As we conclude these words at the National Novena marking the 130th anniversary of the Apparitions at Knock let us all ask the inspiration of that same Mary, Star of the Sea, Queen of Knock, to fill us with something of the hope which she had throughout her life. Inspired by that same hope may she help each one of us to make a difference both in the Church and in the world now and throughout our own lives here on earth as we journey toward our own heavenly home.