

Service of Thanksgiving for St Mary's Church Howth
Sunday 19th November 2017 The Second Sunday before Advent
Psalm 127: *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who built in labour in vain.*

I wish to thank the rector The Reverend Canon Kevin Brew and all members of this parish along with the architect and the builder for the work completed in St Mary's to such a high standard. This work we cherish and it is a mark of your respect and love for this place and for all that happens in it and flows from it. You have done good things here and I wish to encourage you to continue to develop this initiative and this energy and this openness to others and to change for the future.

THE INHERITANCE ON WHICH YOU BUILD AND LOOK TO THE FUTURE

In this parish and in this part of Dublin you have, as well you might be proud to have, a heritage and a history that takes us all back to the very early stages of Christianity in Ireland. Dark days are not a creation of 2017; The Dark Ages descended on Europe after the collapse of The Roman Empire in the fifth and sixth centuries. Ireland became the place of custodianship of the things that really mattered – worship and manuscripts, prayer and fasting – and it became a safe place because it was far away. This is the heritage which you have carried for us all since Saint Nessan and his three sons worshipped on Ireland's Eye in 530 and wrote The Garland of Howth, a Latin manuscript of the New Testament so precious and so unique that it is housed now in the Library of Trinity College. The church moved to the people and King Sirtick in 1042 was responsible for the first church in the village of Howth, The Abbey, where parishioners worshipped until 1650.

Throughout history Howth has responded to a series of turbulent times and these were the times of The Reformation. The Reformation was a period of tremendous spiritual energy and we mark 500 years of The Reformation in this year 2017. Let us never in the Church of Ireland be ashamed of being Reformed; but let us never let this self-understanding deprive us of being Catholic; and let the two definitions together inspire us to be generously and confidently Ecumenical. We have sadly let ourselves be backed into brick walls; we have equally sadly been willing too often to blame others – whether it be The Tragic Troubles in Northern Ireland and the ethic of suspicion that they have engendered; or the social strictures of an Irish Roman Catholicism which today seems to be recognizing that it is as confused and as needy as the rest of us. And we have done this in relation to something that ought indeed to be our crowning glory, the outworking in everyday life of a religious and spiritual contribution to civic society in our day: Generous Christianity. There is always scope to redeem, to reclaim, to restore, to re-ignite this instinct for personal encounter and for institutional warmth of meeting and engagement.

CLAIMING OUR HERITAGE

We need to claim our heritage as ours; this does not mean it does not belong to others; but it is also ours. Our Garland as Anglicans, as Howth has pointed the way from the year

530, needs to be *The Garland of Invitation and Inclusion*. As Anglicans we need to grasp this opportunity. It is my hope and prayer that St Mary's Howth will claim afresh its spiritual heritage and simply go ahead and do this, leading the way for the Diocese of Dublin and Glendalough from within its own people for the total community, to do something simple and profound in your 150th Year of Celebration: *finding ourselves at the heart of our neighbour and at the heart of The Other within the love of God*.

To me, and I have thought and prayed about it ahead of coming to worship with you at the kind invitation of your rector, Canon Kevin Brew, today, this is the calling and the invitation of the Diocese to the Parish of St Mary's Howth: to look around and to enjoy the clues and the footmarks of faith and of discipleship that you have. The first of these surely is the legacy of St Nessian in the form of The Gospels itself but also the zeal and the confidence to build a church on Ireland's Eye, out in the sea and to trust to God and the elements of nature. The second is surviving the traumatic days of both The Reformation and The Disestablishment and coming through them, different certainly but intact and ready for a new adventure. The third is the East Window of this very church depicting Christ the Healer of humankind together with Patrick, Brigid, Columba and Nessian holding *The Garland*. The fourth is something of which you were clearly aware and of which The Diocesan Synod is now all too aware since our gathering in October of this year: the building and development of new housing areas in at least fourteen distinct places in our diocese. It is no longer enough to say: But our churches are in the wrong place. The only thing that can be said is: These are souls for whom Christ died. The only next thing that can be said is: I want to meet them and I want them to know God. The argument is no longer about us and about our survival.

THE 150TH ANNIVERSARY OF DISESTABLISHMENT

We are fast approaching the 150th Anniversary of Disestablishment in 2019. I had the pleasure of attending The Governing Body of The Church in Wales this year and they are preparing for their Centenary of Disestablishment in 2020. They were adamant that *Self-generosity* was simply not enough. I thought it a good phrase. I thought also we in the Church of Ireland could readily fall into such a trap ourselves and internalize the exciting possibilities that lie within Disestablishment 150 for everyone. I felt that we needed to make very sure we did no such thing. *Self-generosity*: remember the phrase please and remember to avoid it!

BLESSING

I leave you with a simple blessing which the ancient people of this land invoked on themselves as they awoke and began their day of work:

*Circle me Lord
Keep protection near
And danger afar.*

*Circle me Lord
Keep hope within
Keep doubt without.*

*Circle me Lord
Keep light near
And darkness afar.*

*Circle me Lord
Keep peace within
Keep evil out.*

We could do a lot worse as we ask the same Lord to keep *building this house*.