**PSALM 122**

**Genesis 28: 11-18**

He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And the Lord stood beside him and said, ‘I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.’ Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!’ And he was afraid, and said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.’

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

**John 10.22-29**

At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered, ‘I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me; but you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father’s hand.

Sermon to mark the two hundredth anniversary of St Stephen’s Church, Dublin

The archbishop of Dublin and bishop of Glendalough

Evensong 7.30 pm June 24th 2024

Psalm 122.6: *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; may those who love you prosper …*

SETTING THE SCENE

St Stephen’s Church has stood in its unmistakeable and in its unmissable place in the middle of the road in Mount Street Crescent for two hundred years. It has captured the affection of generations of Dublin people and is known not so much by its ecclesiastical name as by its nickname: The Pepper Cannister. This is because of the small tower, a minaret style structure, standing on top of it. This has caught the visual imagination of millions of passers-by over decades of familiarity and remains what we might call a sky-mark to this day. A gift to the city on the part of The Earl of Pembroke, it is in a sense the sister church of St Bartholomew’s Clyde Road, just a few sets of traffic lights away from here in today’s terms or, even more environmentally conscious, ten minutes away on a bicycle. The streets around here bear witness to the fact that all of this area was part of and associated with The Pembroke Estate.

It is my pleasure to welcome parishioners and former parishioners, residents of this area, civic dignitaries as well as members of our cognate parish of St Ann’s and all who wish us well in this significant and historic anniversary year. Everything changes around our ears and under our feet. But witness to the Resurrection of Jesus Christ remains a constant as it adapts to differing circumstances in its expressions of the faith. This is the faith of the earliest church which grew out of struggle and martyrdom into witness in social action and values of everyday discipleship. What remains constant is the worship of Almighty God and the response in faith, in hope and in love to the footfall of God in God’s world through the agency of God’s people. We are reminded forcefully of this martyrdom on this very day in the patronage of St Stephen (whom we mark annually on December 26th) and in the calendar date on which we celebrate this bicentenary: The Feast of St John the Baptizer, June 24th. John points forward and Stephen points back to Jesus. In this way, we are upheld in the uneasy tension which is the life of faith in a secular state and in a religious hothouse that was theirs in their day and regularly can be ours in our day.

THE SCRIPTURES CHOSEN FOR THIS EVENING: DEDICATION AND DISCERNMENT

The Readings selected for this evening hold our attention in somewhere very specific, in a religious space of dedication. The story of Jacob in Genesis 28 gives us the ingredients of what it is to make a place holy. The first ingredient is creating and sustaining the connection between earth and heaven. The second is living for the future through the promise of land and habitation for generations to come. The third is the making holy, sanctifying, something for domestic use by turning a humble stone into a pillar of God’s presence – Beth-El, The House of God. All of this we ourselves can do. All of this is something to which the story of Jacob directs us. Connections beyond ourselves widen our horizons and stimulate our imagination. Believing in the next generation helps us to live for the future as we live in the present and this sense of future coming to meet us gives our church life even greater urgency. Being able to spot the sanctity of the everyday helps us to connect the mundane with God and ourselves with God. But it is never so simple, is it? The religious warfare of which we read in St John 10 shows us that in regard to what is holy, dedication is not enough. There is even greater need for on-going discernment because everything continues to change and what once looked like ‘this’ no longer is ‘this,’ it has become ‘that.’ And so Jesus is heard to say: The works that I do in my Father’s name testify to me, but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep … Dedicated inheritance is simply not sufficient if you cannot discern, if you cannot see, the holiness of God where it is to be found. And because the holiness is God’s holiness, it is bound constantly to change because, in our limited vision, it is always confined and limited by our perception of it.

MARTYRDOM/WITNESS

We are brought full circle to the call to witness that carries us to this day and carries us forward from this celebration. Compared with Christians in many other parts of the world, we live a charmed existence. Our ecclesiastical existence is full of challenges, brought about mainly by spiritual inertia and internal de-energizing, but it is not fraught with deadly dangers. We are nonetheless surrounded by tented homelessness, by the anxiety and fear of young men living in our communities, young men who have made it here because they are young, strong and resilient, and we set fire to their accommodation ahead of their arrival. We are surrounded by child poverty which mysteriously disappeared off the radar during Covid-19 and now is back on the map as ever it was. We are surrounded also by a societal malaise which is angry and retaliatory for a reason; and that reason is a manifest inequality of distribution while at the same time there is an ever greater quest on the part of good people making policy to offer opportunity to more and more people who are not in a position to access it or to avail of it. Instability and opportunity are unhappy companions as also are privilege and alienation in a society that is sophisticated and, in seeking to be progressive, needs not to abandon a range of civic values that have long been associated with a religious way of life that has little traction or attraction today but which need to come back to the top of our way of dealing with one another structurally and personally. Why? It is because these values embody virtues historically present in our societies and they have long been in danger of obliteration more through carelessness than by design in many instances.

VALUES AND VIRTUES - CIVIC AND RELIGIOUS

The fresh expression of such civic values and virtues, setting aside our antagonism towards public religion on the one hand and our twitchiness about a secular society on the other hand, could well be the contemporary witness and constructive martyrdom to which we can turn our attention in the light of this evening’s celebration. We are after all in a very civic part of the city of Dublin. Where might we begin and, even more exciting, where might we end? … We need to break down big words like integration, environment and regulation in order to enable those who are irritated by them to discern both their true meaning and their true benefit. Few people do things, even or especially good things, if they are of no advantage to them. We need to start small, but fund big, to enable people in their localities to see that integration builds a more joyful society; that environmental conscientiousness builds a more functioning society; that regulation releases people to give and to receive the decisions and the actions of one another more safely and more fruitfully. Neither in state nor in church can we punish people into third-person compliance in the longer term. We have neither the spaces in our prisons nor the agreed moral framework to do this.

And where might we end? Recently I asked a group of clergy from elsewhere who spent the inside of a week with a group of my clergy: What would you *give up* if you had *more* time? There was not much of a response. But I stick to my question and I now offer it to all of you: What would you give up if you had more time? I imagine that it sounds as ridiculous to you as it did to them. But I do think that a fruitful, and often a happy, life is more about giving up than taking on. I also think it helps us to address those three words of which I spoke earlier: integration, environment and regulation – hopefully. And, once again, hope is something that has largely evaporated from civic and religious life – giving way to anger. Giving things, the right things, up can help with integration because it provides scope for others to give and to share; with environment because it helps us to reduce both footprint and waste; with regulation because we can begin to discern the wood from the trees in the fog of the maze we inhabit. Things can begin to change as gradually we reduce, as we give up. And for those of us who look for God in this, we can and will find God present in this everyday working out of Jacob’s dream in the open country and Jesus’s resetting priorities in the Jerusalem Temple.

HERITAGE

It would be impossible of me not to speak of the musical tradition of St Stephen’s Church, ancient and modern, but most of all Charles Villiers Stanford, a son of this parish, and in a different musical vein Percy French whose wedding took place here. It would also be impossible of me not to mention The Romanian Orthodox Church and their becoming our fellow-travellers in the way of Christ by their use of this church. This day of martyrdom is made particularly poignant for me because Father Calin Florea of The Romanian Orthodox Church Centre at Drimnagh Castle explained to me and to your rector, Canon Arbuthnot, that in the Romanian Orthodox tradition Holy Communion is served on a red cloth napkin to mark the living fact that, as Tertullian expressed it, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Literally, we receive the sacrament on the blood of the martyrs. It is a powerful reminder to us never to forget.

CONGRATULATIONS

I congratulate everyone concerned on your drawing together preparations for this magnificent service. I congratulate churchwardens, Select Vestry, choir and musical director. I congratulate your rector and all his predecessors and I thank everyone who has made the special effort to attend. I wish all of you well as you step out into the martyrdom and witness of enhanced simplicity that is the hallmark of a renewed society where we give up more than we take on, where we find time for ourselves, for God and for other people and where we develop new ways of seeking and seeing what is God’s gift before our very eyes: and that gift is our lives and the lives of others and the life of our planet.

St John 10.24, 25: *… tell us plainly; are you the Messiah? I have told you, said Jesus, and you do not believe …*