

# **MESSAGE OF THE KNOCK APPARITION, THEN AND NOW**

## **Anxiety in a Consumerist Culture**

**21 August 2019**

*Homily Preached by Archbishop Michael Neary during the Annual Novena to Our Lady of Knock on the occasion of the 140<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Apparition on 21 August 1879.*

Anxiety about the future is pervasive and in many cases debilitating. There is deep concern about family life, about drug and alcohol abuse, about character and responsibility. For many, material success and personal fulfilment have become the goal and purpose of human life. Yet parents are deeply concerned about raising their children. There are so many voices other than parents, from outside the home and indeed from internet and social media within the home that are clambering for attention and are very contradictory of the voices and the authority of parents. This is the situation in which we live today. It is complex, confusing and challenging. The consumerist world in which we live is governed by money, power and possessions. There is nevertheless a genuine spiritual hunger in our world. At the heart of our Christian faith is the conviction that the human spirit is not satisfied with anything short of God.

### **Loss of Our Identity**

In our contemporary situation we are tempted to become totally inculturated in the present, thereby losing our sense of identity as followers of Jesus Christ, overlooking the importance of memory, abandoning hope and placing all the emphasis on the here and now. We are in a season of transition, as we watch the collapse of the world as we have known it in its political forms and economic realities of the past which are becoming increasingly ineffective. It has been said by many critics of religion that the problem of our time is not atheism but idolatry. It is not that we are non-believers but that our beliefs are assigned to unworthy and unworkable objects. Today in a variety of ways the State wants to reshape our values, our fears and dreams in ways that are fundamentally opposed to the Gospel. At the time of the apparition our people were confronted with problems of poverty, eviction, confusion and lack of hope. Today we

endeavour to cope with the challenges which may differ from, but have many similarities with the issues which confronted our ancestors.

### **The Knock Apparition – Troubled Times**

We are very conscious of the hardships which Knock and the surrounding area had endured during and after the Famine and its consequences, starvation, death, dejection and emigration. The situation, in fact, was much more complex. The plight of families was so serious that many were unable to pay their rents and faced eviction. On the 20<sup>th</sup> April 1879, four months prior to the apparition at Knock a monster meeting was held a few miles south-west of Knock in Ballindine. Twenty thousand people gathered. There was agitation and anger in the air. All of this came after three poor harvests in succession with dire consequences for the families. Two months after the apparition, on 21<sup>st</sup> October the Land League was founded in Castlebar. It was a tense, turbulent time of deep social unrest. Starvation, death, dejection, eviction and emigration stalked the land.

Knock itself was an unknown and relatively unimportant village in the West of Ireland. Similarly Nazareth where Jesus spent most of his life was a relatively unknown town or village in Israel. It was never mentioned in the Old Testament. Does this say something about the way in which God intervenes in human affairs and history? In 1879 the Apparition had a special message for the people of the time. One hundred and forty years later it has a very relevant message for us today. Knock would never be the same again after the Apparition. While the shrine is recognised as a Marian Shrine because of Mary's appearance, nevertheless, central to the Apparition is the altar, the Lamb and the cross. This points unmistakably to the Eucharist and the Mass.

### **The Cry of the People for Help.**

In the Book of Exodus when the people of God are suffering at the hands of their Egyptian masters, God intervenes and acknowledges that he has heard their cry and is intervening to respond. At the time of the Apparition the Lord has acknowledged and heard the cry of the people as they coped with adversity of different kinds. The

Mass was very much part of the peoples' faith. From the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century mass-rocks dotted the Irish countryside during the Penal times. People had gathered in rather dangerous circumstances to worship the Lord. In the Apparition, the altar, the Lamb of God and the Cross at the centre of the scene illustrated the way in which the Mass involves the sacrifice of Jesus the Lamb of God. In acknowledging the cross and the Lamb on the altar it highlights for the people their particular sacrifices, their suffering and is a message of hope, consolation and comfort for them.

The appearance of Our Lady flanked by St. Joseph and St. John the Evangelist presents the maternal instinct of Mary who was there at the foot of the cross on Calvary and who is never far from the crosses which God's people carry. The presence of St. Joseph underlines the importance of the Father figure in the human family, while the presence of St. John the Evangelist, preaching from the Book of the Gospels, underlined the importance of God's word.

### **The Message of the Apparition Today**

Jesus' message in the gospels was addressed to particular groups at a particular time, but also across the centuries is addressed to us today and has a meaning and a message for us, so also the Knock Apparition, though silent, continues to "speak" to us today in terms of a particular message for our time. Focussing firstly on the Altar, the Lamb of Sacrifice and the Cross, we recognise that increasing numbers are not participating in the Eucharist. Whenever the celebration of the Eucharist begins to lose its meaning for the people of God then they begin to lose their sense of the Church. There is a crisis of faith today as many no longer walk or worship with us. Yet the Eucharist, properly understood, has been associated with betrayal, with pain, misunderstanding and loneliness. St. Paul reminds us in the first letter to the Corinthians "that the Lord Jesus, on the night when he was betrayed" gave us the Eucharist. The Eucharist then was born in pain and suffering. It will be appreciated by those who know something of the human struggle in their lives. It has been said that the Eucharist is for "broken people".

## **A Fragile and Fragmented Society**

In our society and in our Church today, there are broken people, broken promises, disillusionment, shattered dreams, manipulation and violence. There is the human cry for healing and hope, for understanding, newness and transformation. In the Eucharist, Christ invites and encourages us to avail of these possibilities as He responds to our human cry. Central to the Eucharist is the relationship between love and sacrifice. In human life, love is not authentic if it refuses self-sacrifice. Sacrifice has little value unless it is born of love. In our society there is so much emphasis on independence which often finds expression in the form of individualism and self sufficiency. The Eucharist helps to create an awareness of our fragility, our dependence on the Lord and on others as well as the need for humility and the fact that we do not have all the answers and must be open to new possibilities, new discoveries and new learning.

## **Motherhood in Modern Society**

Moving to the figure of Mary in the Apparition scene and her relevance for us today. The maternal, protective instinct is essential in our world today. Mary combines gentleness with a strength of character. This is so important if children are to grow up respecting others, acknowledging differences but having the inner strength to appreciate their own gifts and values and being prepared to make these available to others in a supportive and encouraging manner. Like all mothers, Mary has that intuitive character, the ability to read what is causing friction for the individual or the family and can also detect the direction in which we are being led in our society. In a complex world we may wonder where to turn, what course to take. Just as at the Marriage at Cana, Mary was the first to detect that something was going wrong, the wine was running short. She addressed the situation and encouraged the stewards to do what her son would tell them. In a busy world with so many choices facing us we may find ourselves in situations which threaten to engulf us. In those circumstances Mary is there maintaining a maternal eye on the situation and encouraging us to do what her son is prompting us to do.

As we go through life, inevitably we experience the cross whether it be in terms of death of a dear one, serious illness, disappointment, rejection. At times like that it would be very easy to yield to defeat, to lose heart and throw in the towel. On Calvary St. John reminds us that Mary stood at the cross. Her presence was a silent but very supportive one. Is there not a link between her silence at the foot of the cross and the silent apparition at Knock? Likewise as we are carrying our crosses Mary is there in her silent and supportive role reminding us that her son has already transformed the cross into a sign of victory. She reminds us that our crosses can enable us to follow in the path of Jesus Christ and therefore be a road to victory.

### **Fatherhood in Today's World**

Moving to St. Joseph, we become conscious of the responsibility of the role of fatherhood in society today. It is a role which has changed in Irish society over the years. Fathers are now not just the only bread-winner in the home; they are also involved in nurturing, encouraging, challenging. It may be in homework and studies, on the playing field or in ordinary human contact and relationships. On the other hand, irresponsibility on the part of some fathers in our culture is becoming more common and with sad results for family and for society, depriving the young of that background of strength and security. Joseph in the bible was described as a 'just man'. While he is in the background, nevertheless, he epitomises that strength, providing security and safety.

### **The Challenge of the Gospel in a Changing World.**

The figure of St. John the Evangelist as he holds the Book of the Gospels and preaches from it challenges us today to reflect on what are the influences which guide us in our society. Are we enslaved by elements of the popular press, opinion polls, social media, celebrities and by social trends? What value do we give to God's word and the teaching of Jesus Christ? As parents and as the first educators of our children, what do we teach them in terms of values, respect, love? Do we enable and encourage them to reflect and question the situations which are growing in complexity and help them to make responsible decisions taking account of the teaching of Jesus Christ and the rights and dignity of others?

**Silence: An expression of Strength and Support.**

The Apparition was silent; no words were spoken, yet the message was very clear. Today we live in a rather noisy world which can be quite aggressive and refuses to listen with resulting confrontation which fails to yield a satisfactory solution. Just a year ago the Holy Father prayed here at Knock in silence. The silence which descended on the pilgrims at Knock on that occasion, 45,000 people in silent prayer was a powerful expression of faith and trust in God and was probably one of the great high points of the World Meeting of Families. Again, we witness the powerful link between the reflective supportive silence of the apparition 140 years ago and the power of silent, meditative prayer last year during the visit of the Holy Father and the need for reflective silence in our busy world.

As we gather on this special occasion we thank God for the Apparition, for what it meant to the people of the time, for its message to us in 2019 and for the graces that have come to pilgrims and their families over all those years. May our presence and participation in the Novena on this special day enable us to go forward with a deeper faith, with hope in our hearts and with love in our living of Christ's gospel.