**HOMILY NOTES – MISSION SUNDAY**

**MASS TO CELEBRATE DOWN AND CONNOR APOSTOLIC WORK**

**ST PATRICK’S CHURCH, LISBURN**

**20 OCTOBER 2019**

Readings : Ex 17.8-13; Ps 120 ; 2Tm 3.14-4.2; Lk 18.1-8

**1 “Aaron and Hur supporting his arms” (Ex 17.12)**

The Word of God is transmitted in a vast array of literary forms in both the Old and New Testament.

The first reading for the liturgy of the Word for the Mass for the Evangelisation of Peoples, which we celebrate this afternoon, describes a rather bellicose scene from the memory of the Hebrew peoples’ journey from captivity in Egypt to the promised land. On that journey they encountered trial and danger. Moses guided, led and inspired them, when energy, trust in God and faith failed them. In this scene Moses’ strength flags. Support from Aaron and Hur enable him to fulfil his role.

This vignette from the book of Exodus catches the key and indispensable role and mission of the Apostolic Workers : for three years short of a century from their homes and parishes in our diocese of Down and Connor they, you, have offered that vital support to missionaries and the communities they served in far flung places.

The work and support of our 55 branches and some 300 members has continued to sustain the work of so many missionaries. It has provided a life line for them as they struggled to find support for their pioneering work. And no doubt that precious link has kept up the heart of many a missionary in moments when isolation and other trials may have pulled on their personal reserves of determination and resilience. For all of this we give thanks today.

Likewise we are grateful for the presence of the concelebrants, Religious, Sisters and Brothers who represent so many Missionary Societies who have enjoyed the support, prayers and friendship of Apostolic Workers in our diocese over the decades. We welcome you and thank you for your friendship. Your work in the field and your friendship has also enriched and expanded the life, missionary consciousness and vitality of our parishes and diocese.

**2 “Remember who your teachers were” (2 Tm 3.14**)

The lines from St Paul’s second letter to Timothy emphasise the importance of cherishing those who opened the ways of wisdom for us – teachers and leaders. In this vein Pope Francis declared this month of October to be marked as an **Extraordinary Month of Mission.** He has invited each local Church and parish to commemorate and draw renewed missionary zeal from Pope Benedict XV’S 1919 encyclical, ***Maximum illud***, and in doing so to revive the missionary dynamic of Christian life and existence.

By contrast with 1919, the focus of that missionary revival is now our own local Church and its mission to our society. Our missionary concern now is spiritual and religious need of our society which cannot be considered apart from the conditions determining the life of the human family and our world.

In June of this year, in his message for World Mission Day, *Baptised and Sent*, Pope Francis gives a ***personal focus*** to mission :

**This missionary mandate touches us personally: I am a mission, always; you are a mission, always; every baptized man and woman is a mission**. People in love never stand still: they are drawn out of themselves; they are attracted and attract others in turn; they give themselves to others and build relationships that are life-giving. **As far as God’s love is concerned, no one is useless or insignificant. Each of us is a mission to the world, for each of us is the fruit of God’s love**

So, through our baptism in Christ we are mission. Our lives enjoy the calling to a creative adventure in the exercise of radical human freedom as we respond to the vision of life traced in the gospel. What can this mission and adventure entail ?

To explore this subject, yesterday at St Mary’s University College, Belfast, our diocese marked the launch of this **Extraordinary Month of Mission,** proclaimed by Pope Francis, with a conference entitled *“Baptised and Sent : the Church of Christ on Mission in the World”.* It was a stimulating event and the Apostolic Work Society was present and represented.

From the presentations, workshops and exchanges, in the light of this annual Mass and gathering of Apostolic Workers, we might recall :

* The vast numbers of Irish missionaries – Sisters, Brothers, Priests, Religious – who left home and country to preach the Good News of the gospel of Christ and to serve the needs of their adopted peoples and lands. Joe Humphreys, author of *God’s Entrepreneurs,* gave us the benefit of his researches in this regard and recalled the zeal, ingenuity and dedication of these women and men. And with skillful equanimity he also reminded us of legacy issues of defective governance, abuse of power of which we must repent with contrite sorrow. Of equal importance was his pertinent observation that the Irish state has lacked the maturity to acknowledge the societal, economic, cultural and diplomatic contribution of Irish missionaries, rooted in faith in Jesus Christ, to other lands and peoples. Thereby lies a significant cultural challenge for the education systems, opinion shapers and intellectuals on this island.
* The need for abiding support, such as that offered by Apostolic Work, for young Churches and young Christian communities which face persecution was presented by Fr Paul Kanghai from north eastern Nigeria, presently living in Kinnegad parish and pursing post graduate work at St Patrick’s College, Maynooth. Having outlined the relatively recent arrival of Christianity in Nigeria, its spread in the southern areas of the country and the long millennial history of Islam and the Arabic language in the northern regions, he traced the emergence of Boko Haram and Herdsmen militias and their destructive, terrorising and tragic use of violence. Listening to his remarks, one could not but think of the need such young Christian communities have for support and contact from outside and of the importance of cooperation between missionary support groups such as, Apostolic Work, or indeed, Aid to the Church in Need. Enhancing cooperation in their favour between relevant church organisations, identifying new ways for our time to enhance such cooperation and support may be a matter for consideration on your part.

A range of other fascinating subject fields were considered including :

* the challenge for us of all of the encyclical, Laudato Sì, as mission in our world
* how to shape and build a missionary parish
* how our local Church might benefit from the experiences and world view of returned missionaries,
* what impediments does our way of doing things block the potential contribution of returned missionaries to our parishes and dioceses
* how do we build up a missionary spirit in our parishes and among our young people - we heard of the impressive initiatives such as, **Habitat for Humanity** and the CBS/Edmund Rice **Outreach to Zambia** which many of our young people have driven and undertaken.

As the Down and Connor Apostolic Work approaches its centenary, you, its members, may be well placed in terms of your current work and your knowledge of the living memory of what the Society has achieved to fertilise the Parish Councils of your respective parishes with suggestions as to how our parishes may identify new ways of supporting the ever developing missionary work of the Church as it undertakes new forms in response to the needs and signs of the times and at the prompting of the Holy Spirit.

**The cry of the widow (Lk 18.1-8)**

The image of the cry of the widow to the judge in the gospel parable is something of a clarion call for personal mission in our times. Her voice echoes the cry of mother earth for care and protection, for conversion to sustainable and ethical lifestyles in our economic, environmental and political policies. Her voice is that of the millions trafficked into modern forms of slavery – even here, one fears, in our society. She wails on behalf of those denied their human rights and in the name of victims of all forms of abuse, persecution and injustice. Her voice is also that of those whose freedom of thought is manipulated by fabricators of half truths. Her voice is that of those who call for the protection of inviolable unborn life in mothers’ wombs. Her cry echoes those whose voices champion the right to exercise freedom of conscience in our liberal democratic society and are marginalised by soft-minded abnegation of the ultimate social ethical consequences of that dismissal.

With vital matters of our times such as these, we come face to face with some of the core challenge of the Extraordinary Month of Mission for our local Churches and for each believer : our mission as Christians in response to the Good News of the gospel for the issues and challenges facing humanity in our times. Such challenges – the inviolability of human life, the phenomenon of migration, the plight of migrants and refugees, homelessness, addictions, the loss of meaning for life and living, the search for such meaning by so many, climate change and its impact on the environment and future generations, the governance of the world economy and its financial systems and the values with which they are governed, inter-faith understanding and dialogue, the legitimacy of democracy, the development of our international institutions of governance : these are mission terrain for Christians and for civic Christian action.

You might well remark that this is all far removed from the activities and concerns of the Apostolic Work. And one can identify with such a reaction!

But let’s remember : over decades your work here in your homes and parishes enabled missionaries to unleash and realise talents, through the inspiration of the Good News of the gospel, which they might never have unleashed at home, for the development of peoples in all kinds of sectors of life and in all kinds of predicaments. Today the locus of mission also includes our own society. The peripheries, rims and edges of meaning in life, of agnosticism and faith, of inclusion and exclusion, of despair and isolation are within our homes, parishes, society.

It is our task as parishes, communities of living faith, through the good offices and voluntary efforts of our Parish Pastoral Councils, our Parish Finance Councils, our Pastoral Community Forums and all our agencies of outreach, such as the Apostolic Work Society, to imagine and devise ways in which we can play our part in addressing those contemporary needs which characterise our context and setting. Thus we will do our bit to “*keep faith on eart*h”(Lk 18.8) when the Son of Man comes and respond to the cry of the widow whose voice still champions fundamental rights across centuries and in the face of regimes and ideologies.

Keeping the light of that faith on earth alive and active continues to be the great work of the Apostolic Work.

Together with our concelebrants who represent numerous missionary societies and all our guests from the missionary societies I thank you for your work, fidelity and generosity. And with you, the Apostolic workers of this diocese of Down and Connor, I express our sincere gratitude to all who support your work and thus link us with the work of the Church, the implementation of the gospel, around the world.

Amen.