

CHRISTMAS SERMON
ST MARY'S CATHEDRAL, EDINBURGH
HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN
FRIDAY 25 DECEMBER 2009

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege being here with you today as we celebrate the great feast of Christmas once again.

ROLE OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST – CALL FOR REPENTANCE:

During the season of Advent the central character as well as of course Mary and Joseph and then Jesus is this cousin of Our Lord, John the Baptist who came preparing the way for Jesus. In scripture we are reminded that John came to prepare a community of repentance who would indeed be ready for the Messiah.

The community was to be a community not of those who went around moping about their sinfulness. Rather it was to be a community of those who had changed their ways and their whole system of values and priorities. The Hebrew concept of repentance which John the Baptist proclaimed was a matter of turning round and going in the opposite direction. To be ready for the Messiah meant – and still means – such a radical change of attitude.

We know that John the Baptist himself had prepared for the coming of the Messiah by going out in to the desert – for the Messiah was to come across the desert – as did Israel at the exodus from Egypt. John's clothing and his whole way of life showed his rejection of the current materialism and his single minded dedication. His is not primarily a negative point of view, for his quotation of Isaiah shows that the flattening of the hills and the filling of the valleys is a preparation for the Kingdom of Peace and Justice.

EXPERIENCES PRIOR TO ADVENT SHOWING REPENTANCE INDIVIDUALLY AND COLLECTIVELY:

Shortly before this year's season of Advent I myself had two experiences of real life celebrations in communities of repentance. On each occasion one might say there was a matter of turning around and going in the opposite direction – there was a radical change of attitude.

The first occurred when I was with the **Religious Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception in Jericho in Kenya**. The Sisters themselves along with those with whom they were coming in contact were trying to bring about a new way of life for those to whom they were ministering. Their project in Kenya is called: "Live with Hope" – and they particularly tried to inspire those who had no hope – the most deprived, those out of work, homeless and those in prison and especially street children.

I am sure that many of you have helped charities looking after and caring for street children – and it was a privilege to be with these Sisters along with the young people for whom they were caring and who had been abandoned, many at a very early age on the streets of the cities. Not having any family on earth they called themselves: “The Family of God”.

The particular project which they had in Jericho was quite simply that of looking after the cities toilets. No one else wanted that particular task – it was of the most menial tasks that could be found. However the Family of God cared for those toilets with loving care and protection ensuring that they were of the highest standard and with the small profits which they made ensured that they and those younger than themselves had some form of education with the help of volunteers from overseas. For them – those street boys - **they were turning around and going in the opposite direction** – they were giving up a life on the streets involving glue sniffing, taking of drugs and stealing to keep themselves alive – to doing something positive; and it was indeed a sight to be seen.

The other experience just shortly after that was in **the previously war stricken country of El Salvador. Some thirty years ago the Archbishop of San Salvador**, Archbishop Romero had been assassinated whilst celebrating Mass; some ten years after that, twenty years ago precisely, six Jesuit Priests lecturing in the University of Central America were similarly assassinated – quite simply for handing on some of the principles of justice and peace in the University in which they served trying to inspire the young people who came to them to have a better life in El Salvador itself while handing on something of the standards which they were receiving to others. And for that those six Jesuits along with their cook and her daughter were brutally shot within the campus of the University – as if by destroying them the assassins could destroy their standards of love, justice and peace.

The “turnaround” in this particular instance was **that of the Government** led by the new President of the Republic, Mauricio Funes. While I was in San Salvador I had the privilege of being present at the Presidential Palace when the President gave posthumously to the families and the Jesuit colleagues of the assassinated Jesuits the highest civil award in the country as a gesture of repentance for their unjust assassinations. Again a turnaround was evident – a radical change of attitude; and a decision on the part of the President and the Government of going in the opposite direction.

OUR FOLLOWING THE EXAMPLE OF ST JOHN THE BAPTIST LIKE OTHERS:

At times we ourselves in our own lives must realise that we must also turn round and go in the opposite direction – we must have a radical change of attitude in our own lives.

I mean first of all that in our own lives we must ensure that any times we have strayed from the narrow path that leads to God we must sort ourselves out. We ourselves must ensure that we are at peace with God and with others as we prepare for and celebrate the coming of the Messiah each year at Christmastime.

And perhaps there is an even greater responsibility on the shoulders of each one of us at this present time when we are aware of that increasing secularism in our own country; when values and priorities of which we are aware in our country at this present time and which are enshrined in Law are not Christ like in any way and do not enshrine in some way or another the Laws of Almighty God.

We are all aware that we are living in a multi cultural society in Scotland at this present time – and we so happily and gladly welcome members of the world’s great faiths in to our midst. However we must never forget that Scotland has been and hopefully always will be a Christian country living by the standards of Jesus Christ himself, the Son of God.

In doing all this we are continuing what has happened here in Scotland in this past year.

In the course of the past 12 months Scotland has celebrated a "Year of Homecoming" culminating in a wide variety of celebrations on St. Andrew's Day. Our homecoming year has seen ex-patriot Scots and many thousands of members of the Scottish Diaspora "come home". We have been glad to welcome them and hope they will return.

It is my hope that now and in the years to come, we here in Scotland will experience our own "homecoming" in which Scots "come home" to their faith and rediscover the Christian convictions upon which our nation was built and which the generations who came before us upheld.

I hope 2010 will see a return home to Christian values and beliefs in our country. To those Christians who **have left their church** and lapsed from their faith I say – make 2010 the year to rediscover the eternal truths of the Christian message. **To those of no faith** I urge you to make this coming year the one in which you discover what the Christian message says and how it is relevant to your life. **To our fellow Scots of other faiths**, I hope you will take time in the course of 2010 to learn something of the Christian faith which has so shaped the society in which you now live.

CONCLUSION:

As it was not easy for John the Baptist to continue proclaiming his standards and his way of life, with it eventually leading to his own death by martyrdom – so too for ourselves. We used to say: “It is not easy to stand up and be counted”. It never was; it is not at this present time and I am sure it will never be either in the years which lie ahead.

At the end of the second week of Advent I had a telephone call regarding a priest I had met on my visit to Kenya some weeks previously. He was Father Gerry Roche, an enthusiastic Kiltegan priest of some 68 years of age, who was giving his life to the people of Africa, especially in Kenya, to help them in their process of ‘turning around’ and ‘acknowledging a new direction in life’. Sadly his efforts came to an abrupt end as the phone call that morning told me of his brutal murder in his parish house of St Patrick’s in Kericho, with his murderers apparently seeking money. Another death for Christ and Christ’s standards – like St John the Baptist 2000 years ago; like Archbishop Romero 30 years ago; and like so many brave men and women down through the centuries.

As we prepare for and celebrate the great feast of Christmas, let us be resolute in our desire to go forward – living that Christian life which has been a God given gift to us – just as that gift of the Christ Child 2,000 years ago was also a unique gift from Almighty God Our Father in Heaven.