Mass of Chrism 2024.

“Something strange is happening – there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silence because the King has fallen asleep in the flesh. Rise, let us leave this place. I will not restore you to that paradise, but I will enthrone you in heaven. The kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.”

These words are taken from an ancient homily for Holy Saturday. They were read every Holy Saturday morning in the Chapel of the Irish College, where we had a solemn silence until midday. And that silence still resonate with me on every Holy Saturday morning.

I find them particularly significant during this Holy Week when we gather for this Mass of Chrism at this time of uncertainty in our diocese, of whether we will remain on our own or be joined to another. And in a sense they give us perspective, guidance and hope.

‘The earth keeps silence because the King is asleep’. On that first Holy Saturday morning a deep sense of loss must have been the predominant feeling among the Apostles and disciples. The trauma of Good Friday over, the body of Christ had spent its first night in the tomb and like mourners all over the world on the morning after the funeral, there was just emptiness. Together with this sense of loss there was also the sense of letting go; letting the presence of Christ, their companion, go; letting all the challenges and hopes of his company and message, go. The big question for the disciples on that first Holy Saturday morning was; where to now?

As a priesthood and as a diocese we find ourselves living in this silence at present and we share in this not knowing what the future has in store for us. And there is understandable apprehension. For the ancient homilist, the silence surrounds the King who is asleep and the apprehension is the lot of the disciples. The apprehension experienced by the disciples is ours at present and I need to acknowledge this, not knowing whether we will remain an independent diocese or be joined to another and then, what other.

However, the homily gives us some guidance and hope in the line ‘Rise, let us leave this place. I will not restore you to that paradise, but I will enthrone you in heaven’. For the Church in Ireland there is no going back to the past. Yes, we can recall the past, the big numbers of priests and nuns in this diocese, the need to go on temporary mission abroad as young priests because of the numbers, parishes with more curates than were probably needed or indeed welcomed by some parish priests. And so on. We have certainly left that place and, as the homilist said, ‘I will not restore you to that paradise.’ The but which follows is all important for us and needs to be kept firmly in our minds. ‘But I will enthrone you in Heaven.’ Ultimately, for all of us, lay, religious and clergy, that’s what it’s all about and that’s what important; the hope of Easter, the promise of eternal life.

For us priests, despite the uncertainty and despite the enormous changes we have been part of and are asked to continue to be part of, the goal we had when we set out on the journey to priesthood remains the same; the desire to answer God’s call; the desire to serve his people and his Church as best we can and ultimately the desire to inherit his promise of eternal life. These remain the same no matter in what circumstances we as priests or us as a diocese finds itself.

History also teaches us the lesson of hope. When the last old monk with his clogs half worn and clinging to his feet, clattered down the stairs of the Round Tower in Killala he probably thought that the end had come. As he turned the key on that door for the last time little did he know or realize that a new flowering in a totally different way would eventually emerge on the banks of the Moy, the shores of the Atlantic and the edge of Lough Conn, with the abbeys of Moyne, Rosserk and Errew. And after they fell into ruin, that the forty eight churches we have at present in this diocese would emerge.

What happened on Easter Sunday morning, after the devastation of Good Friday and the silence and apprehension of Saturday, was not expected or foreseen. Even the Evangelist, writing afterwards, suddenly remembered that Christ had in fact given them hints of what was to come but they didn’t really pick it up.

We leave this Cathedral and this Mass of Chrism 2024 with the words of that ancient Holy Saturday homily in our minds; ‘Rise, let us leave this place. I will not restore you to that paradise, but I will enthrone you in heaven. The kingdom of heaven has been prepared for you from all eternity.’ Ultimately, that’s all that matters for all of us.