

RECEPTION OF ECO-AWARD IN BALALLY PARISH

Second Sunday of Advent: 4th December 2016

Readings: Is.11: 1-10; Rom.15: 4-9; Mt.3: 1-12

There are different themes running through our liturgy this morning. On the one hand, we are celebrating the Second Sunday of Advent and, on the other hand, we are receiving an Eco-Award from Eco-Congregation-Ireland. Let me say a brief word about the latter.

Eco-Congregation is an ecumenical group, made up of Methodists, Church of Ireland, Catholics, Presbyterians and Quakers. Eco-Congregation is a prophetic body. If it didn't exist, it would have to be invented.

It is prophetic first of all by providing a united platform for the churches to speak with one voice on matters relating to the environment. Secondly, it is prophetic by gently, but firmly, reminding churches of the important role and leadership they can play in addressing the ecological crisis of the twenty-first century. Further, Eco-Congregation encourages all of the churches in Ireland to take an ecologically-aware approach to worship, lifestyle, property, and investments.

Balally Parish is deeply honoured to receive this award and recognition from Eco-Congregation Ireland. I'll say a little more about this after communion, when we are presented with the award by Sr. Catherine Brennan, representing Eco-Congregation.

You will have noticed the interesting items brought up in the procession at the beginning of Mass: water, earth, fire in a candle, picture of a wounded planet, and bulbs in a basket.

As we all know only too well, water, clean water is a highly controversial topic in Ireland at this time. The maintenance, preservation and equitable distribution of water is an ecological challenge.

Earth is a reminder that we have come from the earth and will return to the earth. The book of Genesis reminds us that the breath of God, the Spirit of God, breathed into the dust of the earth to give us life (Gen. 2: 7).

Scientists today tell us that the human is stardust in a state of consciousness and freedom. We might, therefore, better understand ourselves as 'earthlings' or 'worldlings' or 'children of cosmic dust'.

The third item brought up in the procession was 'fire'. Fire in the burning candle symbolises energy. We are now learning that all of us to move from a dependency on the fossil fuels of coal, gas and oil to renewable forms of energy, one of the great challenges facing humanity at this time if we are to save the planet.

The fourth item was a picture of a broken and wounded planet. There is a growing realisation that it is "we" who have damaged planet earth. If we have caused this

suffering of the earth, we are now called upon to heal this destabilisation of the delicate balance between the natural world and the world of human beings.

Lastly, we have spring bulbs in a basket, symbols of hope. Everyone is invited to take a bulb from the basket at the end of this liturgy and to plant it in your garden. I am reminded here of Martin Luther whose 500th anniversary we celebrate in 2017. He once described a person of hope as someone who, in the face of death, goes into the Garden of Life to plant a tree, and knows that he does not plant in vain. As Christians, we are called to be people of hope, planting the seeds of trees, even though we may not live to see the trees in our life-time.

That image captures accurately how we are to respond to the ecological crisis today: what we do *now*, and how we act *today*, will affect the kind of world we hand on to the next generation, even though we may not live to see the fruits of our actions. One thing is certain: our children and grandchildren will live to see the fruits, or the debris, of our actions.

It is a cliché to say we live in a time of extraordinary change, social, economic and technological. We live in a post-Brexit, post-Trump, and a post-truth changing world. However, by far the most serious change taking place in our world today is ecological change. We are living in a world that is undergoing serious ecological decline and environmental deterioration.

The questions we must ask, the issues we must face, are these:

- Can we arrest the ecological decline?
- Can we halt the environmental degradation?
- Can we put an end to the gradual destruction of our planet?

Governments have signed up to international agreements, including the Irish Government, at the UN Paris Conference on Climate Change (June 2015) and, more recently, at Marrakesh (2016). Governments have made promises to meet targets by 2020 and 2050. Will we keep these promises? Will we reach these targets? To date, all the evidence suggests that we in Ireland will not achieve our goals.

Pope Francis issued an important encyclical in June 2015 "*On Care for our Common Home*". For the Pope, to be a Christian is to be someone called to care for God's creation and this call is intrinsic to Christian faith, and not, therefore, as an optional extra (LS, a. 217).

Pope Francis goes further by saying that to degrade the integrity of the earth and to strip the earth of its natural resources is a sin (LS, a. 8).

But I hear you ask: what has all this to do with Advent, the Second Sunday of Advent, that we are celebrating today in this liturgy.

Let me make one link between Advent and Ecology.

In our Gospel Reading, John the Baptist calls us to repentance: "Prepare a way for the Lord, make his path straight".

We are all called to conversion, that is, to a change of heart, in preparation for the Advent of the Christ-child, the arrival of the Prince of Peace into our world and into our own personal lives.

Part of that conversion includes a change of heart in our relationships with the earth, in our relationships with the creatures of the world, and of course in our relationships with each other and the enduring presence of the Creator-Spirit within creation.

One of the themes running through the Papal Encyclical on the environment by Pope Francis is the following: we are all inter-connected (*LS*, a.16, 42, 240), inter-related (*LS*, a. 92), and inter-dependent (*LS*, a. 42, 164). Because of this organic unity running through our world, we must respect the integrity of creation, of each other and of the intimate presence of the Spirit of God in creation.

Pope Francis is very clear that we cannot save the planet without conversion (*LS*, a. 216-221). He talks explicitly about the call to 'interior conversion' and 'communal conversion' (*LS*, a. 216-217).

In brief, the conversion required during Advent in preparation for Christmas must include an ecological conversion, a conversion that calls each one of us to protect and nurture the integrity of God's creation. Being a Christian in the twenty-first century carries with it a commitment to care for God's creation, not as optional, but as something essential to Christian faith today (*LS*, a. 217).