

Homilies for January

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Homilies for January

Eugene Duffy

Second Sunday of Christmas

January 2

May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you. . . .

Each year on the twenty-first of December hundreds of people make their way towards Newgrange in Co. Meath. They arrive before dawn to try to get a glimpse of the central chamber of this great tomb, as it is lit by the rays of the rising sun. This burial place was built about five-thousand years ago, and even to this day it is a remarkable feat of engineering and construction. It is a curious tomb because on the shortest day of the year the rising sun lights its farthest end for about seventeen minutes, and will not do so again until the same date the following year. The question we may ask is: 'Why was the burial place designed in this way?' One possible explanation is that these ancient people were saying: despite the darkness and misery which exist all around us, the gods have not abandoned us, they are present with us to bring light into our lives again. They can pour that light into our deepest recesses, even our dead are touched. These ancients, then, were men of hope, so hopeful that they built a monument in its honour.

If our remotest ancestors in Ireland were so imbued with hope how much more so our fathers in faith? They didn't just erect a memorial to hope, they lived their lives in hope. Surely Abraham was a man of hope, who set out in search of the land the Lord was to give him, hopeful that the Lord's promise to him would be fulfilled. His trek across the Near East was a journey made in hope. His descendants too were people of hope. While the Hebrew slaves laboured in Egypt they never lost heart totally. They looked forward continually for the day they would be allowed to return to their homeland. It was this constant hope burning within them which helped them to discern God's intervention when he prepared the Exodus for them.

This same Exodus story was an inspiration and a comfort to the oppressed negro slaves in America during the last century. They concluded from their reading of the Bible that if God is still alive and

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interested in his people he must be anxious that the slaves of today be freed as his chosen people were set free from bondage in Egypt. The negro spiritual songs reflect the hope of this people, they show their longing for a homeland on earth and in heaven, for freedom from the slavery of men and of sin and the desire to live in peace and justice now and forever.

Today there is a new kind of despair and disillusionment haunting the world. There are wars and revolutions; there is massive hunger, there is the fear of a nuclear holocaust, of environmental pollution and the aggravation of the drug problem. In the face of such terrible prospects there is a need for Christians to renew their hope in Christ and to offer something of their vision to a pessimistic world.

Just as our forefathers at Newgrange saw the light dawn with drama after the longest night of the year, so we see the light of the world come into our midst when the world seems dark all around us. The Word has taken flesh and lived among us. The Son of God has experienced our misery and hardship, indeed he has felt it more sorely than most of us. He is no stranger to our afflictions. Because Jesus accepted our condition to the full the Father raised him from the dead and placed him at his right hand. His suffering was the road to glory. We know that our difficulties are not forgotten by God but that they can become a means of reaching out to him in hope. We know that if we allow the life of Christ to be our pattern and guide, then, we too will share in his glory. 'May he enlighten the eyes of your mind so that you can see what hope his call holds for you. . . .'

Feast of the Epiphany

January 6

Before him all Kings shall fall prostrate,
All nations shall serve him . . . (Ps 71:11)

Today we celebrate the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord, the day when the nations of the world are invited to come and see the Lord in the flesh. In a way the Epiphany is like meeting a pen friend for the first time. We formulate images for ourselves of what the person will be like, the accent, the clothes, the mannerisms and so on. Yet meeting the person in the flesh is liable to shatter a lot of our pre-conceived ideas.

The Jews had a certain notion of what this new born king should be like. The Magi too expected that he should be born in the royal household. The first shattering of preconceived ideas came when the Magi found that Herod knew nothing of the royal birth. The second must have come when they found 'the infant king of the Jews' squatting with Mary and Joseph in a road-side shed. It is no wonder that T. S. Eliot has the Magi saying 'Were we led all that way for Birth or Death?'

The birth of Jesus was the birth of a new reign on earth, God's

reign. From now on God was to show the values which were important in his Kingdom. If one was to adopt these values it would mean death to a lot of things that the kingdoms of this world prized highly. The new born King could not be identified with power or prestige nor with any of the attachments that society seemed to appreciate. For too long people had been hidebound by religion and politics, by social and economic considerations. One might say that to a certain extent sin and blindness to others had become institutionalized. Because of a blurred vision the so-called religious people of his time could not see or even interest themselves in the Saviour or the values that he was about to re-affirm in their midst. The Scribes and the Pharisees, the Saducees, the elders and the Romans were all attached to their respective groupings, accepting that group's viewpoint and feeling threatened by anybody or anything that placed their group in jeopardy. Hence their inability to recognize their Saviour among them.

Jesus came among men to free them from their narrowness of vision, to show that deep within each person is a great potential to show love for God and for one's fellow man. Before anyone can show genuine love or respect, before he can speak the truth, he must be freed from any preoccupation with class distinction, from attachments to power, prestige or careerism, to financial status or indeed rigorous legalism. Only when these burdens have been dropped will the person freely respond to the demands which the Spirit makes in the person of the neighbour. To be able to do this one must be prepared to die to selfishness so as to be born in the image of God.

Today we are being sent out to continue the Epiphany of the Lord, to maintain and show forth Christ's humble presence in the world. Christ is still so humble as to entrust himself and his mission to us. We are missionaries by vocation, called to go out to the world to loosen the bonds which hold back ourselves and others from responding generously to God and mankind.

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 9

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

There is nothing like a good fire on a cold winter's evening; it draws us in close to give brightness and warmth. Besides simply radiating heat a fire helps to create an atmosphere of warmth. You might say it warms people's hearts. Gathering around a fire helps to create fellowship and friendship. In a strange way it helps people to relax and to communicate.

In today's Gospel John the Baptist tells the Jews that someone greater than he will come and baptize them with the Holy Spirit and fire. The coming of the Holy Spirit in baptism creates fellowship and community. He introduces the person into God's family and into the

community called the Church. Very often we don't experience the warmth and friendship which the Church community is supposed to provide. But then have we ever tried to radiate those qualities of kindness and generosity which help to build community? Perhaps it is a case of keeping the gifts of the Spirit unopened!

Fire is a source of light; it dispels the darkness around it. Similarly the Holy Spirit comes to us as a source of light, with the gift of faith which enables us to see that we are called to open ourselves to God and to our neighbour. There is an invitation for us to imitate Christ in our love for God the Father and in the loving service we offer to those around us. A fire lit on a beach can be a guide for a ship at sea; it may help it to find its bearings. The fire of love which burns within each Christian is also meant to be a guide for others enabling them to respond more fully to the demands that God makes on each one of us.

Finally fire melts and moulds metals. The old blacksmith put the piece of metal in the fire until it became so hot that he could bend it and mould it to the exact shape of the horse's hoof. The Holy Spirit is a moulder of lives. The person who allows himself to be warmed by the Spirit may find himself doing the unexpected. Jesus himself was moulded by the Spirit at his baptism. He did the unexpected; he broke down the barriers between people and between social classes. He associated with the rejects of society, with public sinners, tax collectors and the poor. The Spirit still moulds people, calling them to do unexpected things; it may be to spend time with the handicapped and learn from them, or to help an unmarried mother or to be sociable and accepting towards the travelling people.

The Holy Spirit can warm our hearts, enlighten our eyes and mould us into his instruments only if we allow ourselves to become sensitive to his presence among us.

Second Sunday of the Year

January 16

'There was a wedding at Cana in Galilee.'

We are given very little information about the wedding at Cana and we are told nothing about the bride and groom. Yet we may assume that they were a typical couple. It is obvious that they invited their friends and acquaintances just as happens today. Their experience of married life was in all probability very similar to that of the average couple until recent times. Just as they celebrated their marriage in the company of family and friends they would rely on these same people to support and encourage them as they journeyed through life together. In the past the extended family and neighbours ensured the continuity and permanence of the marriage bond by the sharing of work and outlook. Those in need were provided for by their own kith and kin and not by a welfare State. This in turn increased inter-

dependence among families and helped to guarantee marital stability.

The reality of marriage today is much different. The average young couple, after their marriage, will have to leave home and familiar neighbourhood to establish a home of their own. Family and local community will no longer act as props to their marriage. Neither will their work help to bring them closer together, because in all probability they will have very different occupations. And if there is genuine need or hardship assistance will come from the State and not from the family.

From the outset, a man and woman intending to marry must now be prepared to rely on their own resources and strengths to make their marriage a place of security. In some respects there is a greater opportunity than previously to ensure the growth of a more mature marriage. The essential aspects have now to be developed by the couple themselves without the guarantee of external supports. The mutual relationship of husband and wife has become the key to the permanence and happiness of the marriage. This calls for a full expression of genuine love, the type of love which St Paul writes about: 'Be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive each other as soon as a quarrel begins. The Lord has forgiven you; now you must do the same. Over all these clothes . . . put on love' (Col. 3:12-14). It is only by the practice of this quality of love and respect that the couple will mature together and act as living witnesses to the sacrament which they have received. This love will only be realized when the husband and wife communicate with each other in truth, respect each other as temples of the Spirit and serve each other with utter selflessness. Perhaps the world of today presents the best opportunity ever to live the inner realities of married life and perhaps no age needed its witness more.

Third Sunday of the Year

January 23

'He read from the book, from early morning 'till noon.'

In the middle of the last century Anthony Trollope wrote: 'There is perhaps no greater hardship inflicted on mankind in civilized and free countries, than the necessity of listening to sermons'. Things changed a lot since Ezra was preaching, considering that he had a spellbound audience from early morning 'till noon; perhaps he was a more eloquent preacher than our contemporaries or maybe the message he offered found more willing listeners.

A typical reaction of a Sunday congregation is to say 'that was a boring sermon', 'he was using jargon' or 'he only comes to life when looking for money'. One of the problems with the Word of God today is that for many people it lacks novelty, 'we have heard it all before'. There is a more fundamental difficulty and that is fear. The Word of God disturbs us, because it is the truth. Therefore it would be much

more comfortable not to hear it or to cushion its effect before it penetrates too deep. Who wants to be told to love his enemies? What rich man wants to be told that it would be easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for him to enter heaven? Or who wants to be told leave all and follow me? As somebody once said 'plain truth is so implausible that most people add in a little falsehood.'

When Ezra read the Law he was doing more than reading out the ten commandments. He situated the Law in the context of God's goodness towards his people. He reminded them of all the favours which God had lavished upon them since creation. It was God who created them and gave them life; who fulfilled the promise to Abraham; who rescued them from slavery in Egypt and with great signs led them safely into the Promised Land and who time and again sent ministers to guide them when they had strayed from their commitments to him. This was the context in which the Law was given, it was the minimum people might do to show their appreciation to God who had been so kind to them. The observance of the Law was an act of love, an expression of thanks to God for his goodness to his people.

Perhaps Ezra's success as a preacher was that he was so positive in his approach. 'The people were all in tears as they listened to the words of the Law.' Yet he told them 'to eat the fat and drink the sweet wine . . . for the joy of the Lord is your stronghold.' They eventually concluded their assembly by confessing their sins and promising to walk in the ways the Lord had directed them.

Our boredom and irritation at hearing the Word of God could be relieved if we were more conscious of God's graciousness towards us. Indeed the method of renewal used by Ezra could serve as well as a model for our own repentance. Too often we approach repentance as a negative exercise, looking at ourselves and our sinfulness and hoping that God will balance the account. A healthier approach may be to remember God's goodness towards us to recognize the blessings which he has showered upon us and in view of this loving kindness our own shortcomings and sinfulness could be seen in their true light, as a failure to respond to the love of God. In this context not only will many of our actions show up as selfish, but equally important, our very attitudes will appear as rejections of grace. Given a little more openness on our part the Word of God could be more 'alive and active' for us.

Fourth Sunday of the Year

January 30

I tell you solemnly, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country.

At the close of the annual priests' retreat in San Salvador, in February of 1980, Archbishop Romero gave an interview to a

Mexican newspaper. During the course of the interview he said:

As a shepherd, I am obliged by divine law to give my life for those I love, for the entire Salvadorean people, including those Salvadoreans who threaten to assassinate me. If they go so far as to carry out their threats, I want you to know that I now offer my blood to God for justice and the resurrection of El Salvador.

Exactly a month later the assassin's bullet went through his heart just as he was saying the words of institution during Mass: 'This is my Body which will be given up for you'. In a strange way his words became a reality.

Archbishop Romero was a man who spoke the truth, who sought justice and freedom for his people. He was the real prophet. His words and his actions sprang from his love for his people. He understood the words of Christ when he said 'A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends' (John 15:13). The prophet is a man who loves his people, who can fearlessly speak the truth to them and on their behalf, even when this causes them to reject him.

Far too often we regard the prophet as the man who can gaze into the crystal ball and tell us what the future holds. The prophets of the Old Testament were men who were aware of God's love for mankind and who continually proclaimed the need for justice and repentance. Jesus recognized himself as a prophet, as one to be rejected. He, too, proclaimed God's love for his people and the need for justice and integrity among men.

Baptism is a commission to share in the prophetic ministry of Jesus Christ. It is a call to witness to the values which he represents. The majority of us will not be called upon to give this witness in the dramatic way of Archbishop Romero. Yet, in the ordinary activities of our family life, our work and recreation we are challenged to take the place of Christ. In the family it may be the call to love more tenderly, to be patient when irritated by shortcomings or simply to endure some of the wounds and bruises against one's self-image. At work there is surely the call to give witness in the dedication with which we apply ourselves. In many work situations today people are accepting very low moral standards from themselves and those with whom they work. It is not uncommon for office staff to use the company telephone to contact friends across the country. Neither is it uncommon for the executive to collect bills which *he* never incurred and use them to claim expenses from his company. The list of possibilities is endless, petty theft, laziness, poor workmanship, etc. To go against this trend in one's place of work may be an unpopular move, but there is the call to be a prophet. Jesus as prophet was rejected and he has said: 'If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you' (John 15:18).