

Seven years ago today, on the Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist, I was instituted as Rector of this parish. On that occasion members of Ahoghill & Portglenone came down to say goodbye and to see where we were moving to. Members of Howth Parish came along to welcome us, to see the fellow who was coming down from this place called Ahoghill, some possibly anxious that the cold winds of Northern religion would start blowing through St Mary's.

During my time in Ahoghill, when Parishes in the Diocese of Connor fell vacant, people would sometimes say, 'I hope you're not planning to move, sir.' I would often rather flippantly reply, 'No, Ahoghill has yet to suffer double for all her sins.' And so I was rather intrigued that the Old Testament Lesson on the night of my Institution, was that passage from Isaiah in which the prophet is commanded to

<sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD's hand  
double for all her sins.

Maybe Ahoghill had finally suffered double for all her sins.

But if you look at this passage, it is a passage about new beginnings. A people languishing in exile were told that God is making a new start. It is this idea of new starts, new beginnings, that I want to explore today.

My institution seven years ago marked a new beginning for me in my ministry. Howth is a very different place to Ahoghill (in saying that I am not passing adverse comment on either of them). It was a new beginning for Rachel and myself in our life together; for Rachel there was also a move away from her circle of close friends. It was a new beginning for this place as you said farewell to Cecil and Dorothy, a well respected Rector and friend.

But then life, if you think about it is dotted with new beginnings. Last week we celebrated Baptism, as two young children were welcomed into the fellowship of the Church. At the end of last month, 8 of our young people were confirmed in Christ Church Cathedral. Yesterday, in Killarney, I officiated at a wedding, as Richard and Jennifer pledged themselves to each other in marriage. Then of course next week, students from the Burrow School leave school to make a new beginning at their new schools.

The Bible is full of new beginnings. The Fall and the Flood are followed by a new start marked by the sign of the rainbow that appears in the sky as Noah and his family leave the Ark. Slavery in Egypt is followed by the Exodus and an entry into the Promised Land. The Exile in Babylon is followed by a return to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple. In the Gospel accounts, the birth of John the Baptist marks a new beginning, the birth of the one who is to prepare the way for the coming of Jesus.

God is a God of new beginnings, of fresh starts with his people. We are the people of God. And so new beginnings, fresh starts should be the hallmark of our life together. One area of new beginnings that can cause pain is that of moving on from hurt and disappointment. We have all made mistakes. We have done, said things we wish we could take back but the things have been done and the words have been said. The new beginning, the fresh start begins by saying ‘Sorry’, sorry to God, sorry to the one we may have offended. Sorry is a word that is often hard to say but offers huge possibilities of healing, of new beginnings. Sorry can often be a hard word to hear; the pain of our hurt is too recent, we are not sure the ‘sorry’ is sincere, we are afraid of further hurt. For healing, for new beginnings the sorry of course has to be responded to in gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation. This is the model that lies at the heart of the petition in the Lord’s Prayer:

forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.

This is why I actually prefer the more modern wording of the Lord's Prayer:

forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

'Trespass' is something I don't do on a building site; 'sin' is much closer to the bone.

So we are called to be a forgiven and a forgiving people. We are a forgiven people. God is a God who knows us, our strengths, our weaknesses, our virtues, our failings. In Christ God meets us, accepts us, forgives us, heals us. I often think that the problem is not so much that we take it for granted; it is that deep down we don't believe it. We find it hard to forgive ourselves so we find it hard to believe that God really does forgive.

God, the God of new beginnings, the God who leads his people out of slavery, who brings them back out of exile, who in Christ prays 'Father forgive them, they do not know what they are doing', is a God of healing, of forgiveness. Out of that experience of forgiveness, may we be enabled to be instruments of healing, of forgiveness, of reconciliation in the places and situations in which God has placed us.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon;  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope;  
where there is darkness, light;  
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek  
to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood as to understand;  
to be loved as to love.

For it is in giving that we receive;  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned;  
and it is in dying that we are born to eternal life. Amen