

Feast of St. Kevin

Homily of Archbishop Dermot Farrell

These days of rapid and radical social and technological change may seem far removed from Kevin: this time of migration driven by war, or by the search for economic opportunity; this culture—blind or even hostile to the transcendent. However, when we reflect on it, the story of Kevin resonates with many aspects of our experience today. To name two, we understand Kevin as a man of God in deep communion with creation. The traditions and legends surrounding Kevin emphasise his closeness to God's creation, and his respect for its integrity as an expression of the love and beauty of God. This surely speaks to an age marked, among other things, by unprecedented threats to the well-being of the Earth, our common home.

Saint Kevin (c. 498-618), was “the gospel clothed, as it were, in a body” (Alban Butler). In honouring him as a model of living the gospel of Christ, we celebrate all the people of faith of our diocese who have sought holiness, and have been nurtured in that search over the centuries since Kevin established the monastic city at Glendalough.

Further, Kevin understood his priestly vocation, and his monastic life, as part of a communion without territorial barriers. Kevin died not long before the great Viking movements which did so much to shape our historical inheritance. We would be ignoring our history to think that change and uncertainty are unique to our own time.

In honouring, Saint Kevin, our focus is not on the past, but on the future. We look to Kevin and our diocesan history not only to find inspiration, but also to rediscover our roots, because, as Pope Francis put it, “without roots we cannot progress.” The past is not “a safety measure that saves us from the risk of going forward, [from] the risk of carrying

the faith, the Christian risk of journeying with Jesus Christ” (Pope Francis, Address to the Participants in the International Conference of Moral Theology, Rome, 13 May 2022).

My call to the whole diocesan family today is to embrace “the risk of carrying the faith,” what Pope Francis calls Christian risk: to respond to the call that is addressed to us in our time, as surely as it was to Kevin in his. It is a call to ensure that the way the Church is organised, our structures or our pastoral certainties do not restrict our mission in the twenty-first century. To do so would be to impose the old solutions on new problems, that is, to use second-hand solutions—which appear tried and tested, but which in the end are *tired and superficial*. A sticking plaster approach to our present pastoral reality is a “hankering after an imagined past” (R.S. Thomas). It is a refusal to accept where we truly are pastorally.

While it is more comfortable, and would seem safer to cling to structures inherited from the past, is in fact a crisis of faith that besets our Church. A new paradigm of parish, one less tied to rigid boundaries, but more attentive to transmitting the light and hope of Christ to women and men of our day is what we need. For this “new” model of parish to emerge we have to accept, that the structures as we know them are no longer fit for purpose. Accepting the need for transformation will allow us to recognise new pastoral possibilities. Let us not forget that embracing the future in this way will be good, for the simple reason that such a future belongs to God.

Our young people say that there is no Planet B. It is a great phrase! It captures and communicates the ecological crisis we are in. We might say the same about the Church: there is no Church B. We do not have the option of a church without encounter! There is no living church without encounter! Just as with marriage: there is no marriage without encounter and

ongoing encounter, so there is no church without encounter and ongoing encounter. It is the same with prayer: there is no prayer without encounter and longing for encounter, so there is no church without encounter, and the hope of encounter, and the longing for encounter.

We have always known this, and lived out of this. Of course, a parish is a place, but it is a place of encounter! It is the place where people who journey together, come together to be together on days of hope and joy, on days of sorrow and loss. Of course, it is localised, but in the end, it is the people who make the parish: you know this, we all know this.

The parish has been, and needs to be, a place of encounter. However, encounter is not static. To meet another changes us. Everyone involved in an encounter is changed. There is always movement in an encounter. If we all stand still, we will never meet. "Life, for all its confrontations, is the art of encounter" (Vinicius De Moraes, quoted by Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 215).

In our rapidly changing world, and our profoundly changed pastoral situation, it is vital that we look anew and afresh at how and where we meet each other. The world has changed, and the modalities of how we meet have changed. Our culture of encounter has changed. However, we still need to meet. We need to journey with each other. Is this not what we discovered so painfully during the pandemic? We wanted and needed to journey with each other. We need a culture of encounter, because "we as a people, [are called to] be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone" (Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 216).

This is what the synodal journey is about: finding good ways of being with each other and journeying together in this new future God is offering us. We journey *with* each other. Church is the community of people who journey with each other, and

our Lord is a Lord who journeys with us: that is Christ's name, his identity—and ours—Emmanuel, God *with us*.

The ongoing *Synod on Synodality* and our *Building Hope* initiative here in the Diocese offer vision and strength to the Church. These initiatives are a call to all of us baptised to deepen our gratitude for the precious gifts we have received as sisters and brothers of Jesus. We are called to use our gifts in the service of the community of faith itself. We face great challenges in this diocese, not least in coming to terms with our missionary role in the Dublin of today. We face a particular challenge of the shortage of priests to minister to our parish communities—communities which themselves are very different from even one generation ago. But it is precisely in the recognition and naming of challenges that we experience the virtue of Christian hope, and recognise our vocation to be Servants of Hope.

Over the past few months parish communities have been journeying together along a synodal pathway: that is, recognizing that, through our common baptism, we all have a place *and a voice* in reading the signs of the times, and in charting our way forward. Over recent weeks we have been focused on the challenge of deep renewal in our parishes in light of the recommendations of the Building Hope Task Force. One of the clearest messages received by the members of the Task Force in their consultation across the diocese has been the need for action, for bold decisions that would liberate energies to do what the Spirit is calling us to do—the Spirit that makes all things new (see *Isaiah* 43:18).

As bishop of the Diocese, it is my strong conviction that we are not called to be passive in the face of changes which imperil the three-fold mission with which we have been entrusted, but together to shape our future in the light of the gospel. I will respond positively and swiftly to the proposals that I receive from parish communities about how we organise ourselves more effectively for our mission: our

mission to witness to what God is doing in Christ, our mission to respond to the cry of the poor, our mission to respond to cry of the Earth. I am also putting in place formation programmes to support those who are willing to undertake leadership and ministry in new ways, working alongside our priests and deacons in the pastoral leadership of our parishes.

I am therefore inviting women and men who feel that they are called to ministry to come forward to train for ministry as instituted lectors or acolytes or catechists. These are lay ministers, women and men, who are publicly recognised by the Church and appointed by the diocese to minister alongside priests and deacons in leading liturgies, supporting adult faith formation, and accompanying families preparing for the sacraments. I will appoint pastoral leaders—deacons, religious and lay people—where necessary when parishes cannot have a resident priest, to support the priest who will have pastoral responsibility for that parish. Their voluntary service will be supported by the pastoral workers in the Diocese. It is my pastoral responsibility, as Bishop, to do this—for the sake of the gospel, and for the sake of the People of God. Christ brought his disciples along a new way. He calls us to find a new way in our time.

Through the Church the Spirit moves to touch the hearts of all the faithful. As Bishop, I recognise that my ministry can only be fruitful, if I am attentive to the voice of the Spirit. The Spirit, “the presence of the Father who clothes us with power from on high” (*Luke 24:49*) is sustaining the ministry of our ordained ministers, priests and deacons. I know that the Spirit is also at work in our parish communities, and will inspire women and men to come forward to take up opportunities for new forms of leadership and service that will enable the Church in Dublin to sustain its mission in the years ahead.

Kevin saw in the beauty of Glendalough the palpable image of

the loving Creator, whose gift of his Son transformed the fate of creation itself. May the spirit of prayer which was nurtured in that beautiful place inspire our own prayer, so that the encounter with God, which was the mark of Kevin's life and ministry, be the foundation of all that we do.

May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to be inspired by the example of Kevin and keep before us the things of heaven amid all the changes of this world.

Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us.

St Kevin, pray for us.

St Laurence O'Toole, pray for us.

Dermot Farrell,

Archbishop of Dublin

