

OUR LADY, QUEEN OF APOSTLES.

Talk given by Fr Eamon Devlin C.M. to Catholic Youth Conference 10 June 2007

I'm thinking today of Betty who is in her late 80s. She lives a lone and has been widowed for many years. As she carefully climbs the stairs in her home with every slow step the words of an old prayer cross her lips:

*Take my hand O Blessed Mother,
Hold it firmly, lest I fall.
I am nervous when I'm walking,
So today I humbly call.
Guide me over every crossing,
Watch me when I'm on the stairs
Help me with my undertaking
Lessen many of my cares.
When the evening falls upon me,
And I fear to be alone,
Take my hand O Blessed Mother,
Once again and lead me home.*

It would be easy to allow the sentiment of an old prayer be little more than just that – sentiment – but Betty's instinct to turn to the Mother of Jesus is what is for her an "in-between place" – on the stairs, is a sure instinct rooted in a profound understanding of the role of Mary in God's plan for the world, and of the powerful place she has in our lives too.

The "in-between place" for Betty on the stairs is an uncertain place, a place of risk where she knows her need for and places her confidence in one who understands her situation and can see her safely onwards. Because Mary is pre-eminently the one who stands by us in the "in-between places" of our lives. She is the one who lived her life in an "in-between place" and she did so by her gift of faith. Mary is God's own "in-between place"; when she said yes to God in her heart and made a home for Him in her womb she became that "in-between place", that place between Heaven and Earth where God makes His first home, God's own risk in love which will bring about once more a meeting of Heaven and Earth as God becomes flesh in Jesus.

When I think of the Mother of Jesus I see her always in "in-between places and situations" – on a roadway between Nazareth and Bethlehem as the pangs of childbirth gather: on the road between Bethlehem and Egypt clutching her child in the fright of flight from Herod's threat; and in a Jerusalem street buffeted between the crowds, some curious, some callous, as her Son carries his cross to Calvary.

All of us have our own "in-between places and periods and situations". That part of us that is uncertain, unfulfilled or uneasy with ourselves or others, the direction we travelled. But to grow and develop, is to change and challenge our "in-between places and situations" while risk filled our roads to maturity, that bring out the best in us.

The foot of the cross was for Mary the brutal brink between life and death; it was to become a new brink where death would dawn to risen life. And Mary, the one who lived in “in-between places and situations” becomes for us the beacon of those who live by faith, which is the bridge between the things that are and the things that may yet be: the guarantee of things not yet known or seen – a sure and certain hope.

What then is my “in-between place” or situation of uncertainty and challenge. Because to own it in the faith of Our Lady is to be on the brink of something new. For some it is a place between the pain of hurt and the growing pain that is forgiveness. For some it is the road from slavery to freedom that comes from grasping the paradox that is self-control. Perhaps I am in that messy in-between place of trying to understand and accept others without compromising my own truth while refusing to resort to blame and blacklisting. There is too an in-between place that seeks to serve and help others without making them inmates of my big heartedness, people who should be grateful, who owe me for all I am to and for them.

Betty, an old woman, on her staircase or about to cross a road, doubtful but determined, struggling yet still striving on, turns to Mary, God’s “in-between place”. And we too can confidently turn to one who has been there before us, who had lived in the in-between places and situations of the human struggle. Mary the one who understands. The one whose strong and simple standing in her own in-between places of risk and insecurity becomes transformed into an energy for others. To go to them to reach out and show to those who struggle and are in all kinds of in-between places, the strong Son of God, her Son, their Saviour.

Mary the first apostle of good news is good news because she is first and foremost disciple of her Son, carrying in his footsteps the cross of crisis and change, and standing strong in those uncertain places of risk that are the challenge of a life lived by faith and built on hope.

And so Mary, disciple of the yes to God – be it done unto me – becomes apostle, first apostle, of a good news of great joy, not to be kept to herself, that the Almighty works marvels for us. He looks on his servant in her lowliness, the lowliness of trust – faith: she goes to Elizabeth, her aging cousin caught in her own “in-between place” of things that cannot be and that are, that she beyond the bounds of giving birth is now with child by faith – the gift of those who live in places that are in between the seen and the unseen, the sure and the unsure.

And Mary, the apostle, is good news: no more need be said; the medium is the message.

And Betty is of course each of us. That mix of doubt and determination; that ebb and flow that is struggle now and then striving onwards. And in our ebbing flowing faith and hope Mary the Mother of Jesus is our visitation who simply stands before us and sensing our struggles summons up our courage – the solidarity of faith with one who stands in all our own “in-between places”.

Wherever my faith is challenged, whatever the questions that arise from deep within these my own in-between places become the ground of great potential. The very place or situation for patient prayer with and through Mary, disciples. The brink of

some new growth within, a fresh and deeper understanding of the gift of God, a more authentic witness to the hope that is within me: the place to struggle with myself and with my questions until having struggled long and hard but honestly and in solidarity with the faith of Mary I grow stronger and the disciple dares to speak and spread good news known newly, perceived profoundly and not to be kept to myself.

Some years ago a film *The Mission* was released. It tells the story of a missionary outreach to tribes in a remote region of the Amazon forests of South America. Successful in enthusiastic response of faith from the people, the mission is however doomed to destruction because of the political considerations of its European sponsors. The last scene in the film which features the systematic slaughter of the Church's newest and most zealous converts takes place in the context of a Eucharistic procession. The priest, surrounded by the people carries the Monstrance with the Consecrated Host towards the soldiers who are shooting at them. When he is shot, one of the people lifts the Monstrance and the people continue walking towards certain death. It is a powerful scene where mass martyrdom takes in an almost mystical quality and the Monstrance becomes the central character lifted time and again from the bloodied ground as bearer after bearer is butchered.

The Mission, at one level a disaster, reaches its fullest flowering: as the Body and Blood of Christ, today's feast day, in the consecrated host becomes mingled with and merges into the battered and bloodied bodies of the people, we know that the believers have themselves become one with the Eucharistic Christ, their broken and bloodied bodies an extension of the Body and Blood of Christ broken and spilled for them and for us on the cross, broken and spilled in them in a forest clearing. It is Calvary once more, the Sacrifice of the Mass taking place in the lives of Christ's Body, the Church.

St. Bernard, reflecting on Mary at the foot of the Cross insists that she is in complete communion with her Son on the Cross because he is flesh of her flesh and his Body and Blood is hers too broken and spilled. And Mary given by Jesus to be mother now to John and to all the members of the Body of Jesus is first to know and first to show what it is to be a disciple becomes an apostle. To follow in his steps and to lead others to love Him and to learn that they too are the Body and Blood, the Church.

Betty, the old woman in an in-between place, struggling between doubt and determination, frail yet full of faith is each of us. She turns to Mary the first disciple who lives by faith in all her own and our in-between places. Mary who becomes first of apostles in faithful union with her Son our Saviour. Betty is each of us and all of us together. She evokes another old woman, our Church: Christ's body, broken, bruised and bloodied. Frail and struggling ever in its in-between places of sinner and saint, and yet imbued with the wisdom of the years and the determination of faith in the God of Her salvation. And Mary, mother of the Church, the Body of her Son, tends him still, stands by His Cross and wants us as members of her Son to care for His Church and to love the Church even as we love our own mothers though life and stage makes them frail and fragile.

Queen of apostles, first of apostles, Mary shows us how to be apostle: living by faith in the in-between parts of our own lives, reaching out to others in the doubts and uncertainties of theirs as Mary did, and tending with great love to the members of Christ's Body, her children in our world today.