

*Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers that they must leave for Galilee; they will see me there.'*

*(Matthew 28:10)*

## **Landscapes**

Dear Confreres, Eamon and members of the Provincial Council, family, friends and colleagues. This is a lovely occasion. It is an affirmation of life in our Community, an expression of continuity, a mutual act of faith – we in God and God in us – that the work begun in us by the Lord is still moving towards its fulfilment.

But while this evening is a lovely occasion it also marks a change for us and in facilitating it we recognise that change is part of our lives – as indeed it is for everyone – but we live for it, as it were, because we think of ourselves as missionaries and as missionaries our landscapes are always changing.

## **Milestones**

The years in which we are living mark a series of anniversaries and we Vincentians are within imagination range of a few of our own. These milestones remind us of people and places we have known and will remember in **our** landscape. The Vincentian Community in Ireland and Britain has more than 200 years behind it. We have been part of the most remarkable passage in Irish history especially in relation to the Church because the period since the early 1800s is paralleled

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<sup>α</sup> St Paul's, Raheny

perhaps only by the so called age of saints and scholars. In between we know the years to have been fraught and fractured.

The period referred to as 'the long nineteenth century of the Church' ended within our lifetimes. Few seem to mourn it, even among its staunchest defenders. For all its magnificent achievements, in medical care and in social provision, and especially where we have been concerned, in education; the legacy that seems almost to be brandished by detractors is the memory of a church that is said to have served only itself. Of course even a moderately careful reading of the history reveals much more than that.

As missionaries, however, we turn and we survey the landscape through which we have come and admirable though it is, it is behind us. The townlands from which we have come, the communities and parishes in which we have ministered, the campuses and schoolyards appear more now in our looking back. It is true, we know where we have come from but we are unsure of where we have come to and the road ahead bemuses us.

## **Into Galilee**

If we are disciples and apostles of the risen Jesus, though, our road ahead leads into Galilee and like the disciples, our Galilee is home. Which is to say, before we know what the Lord is asking of us we go to find him where he first found us.

The reading from St Matthew's gospel which Una has proclaimed for us is a revelation. I asked Una to read for us because she has now served five Visitors of the Irish Province. I'm not sure Una will appreciate the comparison with Mary of Magdala who had seven demons driven out of her but Una and

all our colleagues are harbingers of grace for us, the grace that is part of every service and communication that comes in support of the mission we receive and accept from the Lord.

St Matthew's account of the resurrection of Jesus describes the confusion, the apprehension but also the power and the possibility of discipleship. It is the word breaking into our experience that transforms the moment and ourselves. There are echoes in what St Matthew says of the moment of Jesus' transfiguration, the moment he appears in light earlier in the gospel even as he had set his face toward Jerusalem and the cross. In the bleakest moments of the disciples' experience, some of them see Jesus for who he is. In disappointment we may be given insight like Peter, James and John were at the transfiguration and Mary of Magdala and her companion, also Mary, were at the moment of the resurrection itself, that Christ is our light...a light for our eyes, a light for our hands and a light for our path. In Christ we learn who we are, what we are to do and where we are to go.

Returning to Galilee is no retreat. It is where the Lord wishes to speak to us. Jesus' followers thought it was all over and took some persuading otherwise. Even among the eleven we know some hesitated when they finally met Jesus.

But here's the point, it is the words of Jesus, about himself and about the disciples as well, that empower the disciples. This is more than recharging depleted energy. Jesus gives them authority, his authority, to baptise the whole world. And that authority, that empowerment endures because Christ is with them and us...to the end of the age.

The landscapes we have crossed, those places and ministries where we have met success and something less than that from time to time, are Judea and Samaria for us. Some of us

may have wandered into the Decapolis but now we are called into Galilee to meet the Lord and to receive our great commission, to make disciples of all nations.

### **There is no need for you to be afraid**

We have relatively little with which to venture out. But what we do have we can find perhaps where we possessed it first. The Galilee in which we first encountered Christ may well have been the hearth and home that reared us and we are grateful for the love that nurtured that faith in Christ from the earliest years of our lives, the faith in Christ that would find expression in us in the charism of St Vincent De Paul and St Louise de Marillac.

Because our shared Galilee is the Community, the companionship and collaboration of confreres in a common life with a common rule. This is the landscape in which all that the Spirit began in us at baptism has matured. This is where we will have heard the most frequently uttered words of Jesus presented in a fresh, and certainly in my case, in an electrifying way: 'Do not be afraid.'

And it is here I would like to say a special word of thanks to those who have always exemplified the Vincentian life for me: my father and uncles who met the Vins first in Armagh in the 1940s; my uncle Kevin who has always been an inspiration to me, so much so that as a child, I did the next best thing to getting a tattoo; I took his name at Confirmation.

Having mentioned all that women have been in the life of the early church and are still, I have to acknowledge my Mum, who, even though she married into a tribe of Northerners has

kept her Dublin faith and whose highest of holy days are possibly the Novena of Grace.

I will forever be grateful to the Vins in Castleknock, some of the best of whom were St Paul's men.

And there are, of course the confreres who took on the responsibility of formation in Celbridge. I will mention one name to say something about the Vincentian 'range' to which we were exposed in formation. I recall Diarmuid Moran, whose life in the Community spanned Castleknock, Gateacre, Armagh, St Paul's and Coventry before he settled in among the wildlife in Celbridge, for whom Grace was the good looking one two or three rows ahead of us in first arts. It was Diarmuid who told me once, though, 'Paschal, you have great faith.' And there is the Director who once told me in spiritual direction or communication as we called it, 'Paschal, you're firing on all cylinders today.' There were other words of 'prophecy' too of course, over which we shall now draw a veil.

But, if I may, I would like to acknowledge especially my own contemporaries in the Community. Eamon has been Provincial for six years but his first role in leadership where I was concerned was meeting him as *ange* on my first evening in Celbridge. As *ange* (which means angel) Eamon had to look after me in my first few days in the seminary. Eamon has always had grace.

We are the confreres we have become through the guidance of the Holy Spirit but Providence works through the influence we have on each other. We rejoice in each other, please God, as much as we can be stupefied by each other. And it is on that note, which is more positive than you might think, that I wish to acknowledge John, James, Joseph, Eugene, Sean and Stephen, as well as Jay and Dan. And I remember too this

evening, Peter Byrne who was my classmate in Castleknock and who joined the Vins with me and spent four years with us, who died a few weeks ago.

## Conclusion

Even though there is a great urgency in the way the disciples are hurried back into Galilee, it is clear from what Jesus says to them that they will not be staying long. Our mission continues as we look beyond and move on. Like the disciples' mission our mission is global and there is movement in the international Vincentian Community to make the Congregation around the world more aware and active in this regard.

We are to speak to and **act** in the experience of people driven deeper into distress through poverty, debt, violence or migration. From the simplest gesture to the complexity of organised charity and relief, we are sent to find ways of communicating in **real** ways, saying to a world overcome with angst, Christ is risen, do not be afraid.

We hold to this and we hold it out for the hope of the world. We no longer have the institutions or the institutional supports that we may have imagined once would make this easy for us. There seem to be relatively few platforms that might resemble the rocky outcrops of ancient Galilee, on which we imagine we should stand and declaim.

In this respect, however, our life and mission coalesce. We are a community for mission and in hearing again among ourselves all that inspired us in the past, we can still be missionaries, witnesses to the grandeur of God whose greatness lies in mercy, born of understanding, solidarity and love.

