Sermon to mark The Three Hundredth Anniversary of St Ann’s Church Dawson Street, Diocese of Dublin October 29th 2023

Sermon preached by the archbishop of Dublin

Psalm 127.1 and 2: *Unless the Lord builds the house, those who labour build it in vain. Unless the Lord keeps the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.*

INTRODUCTION

What is so special about the year 1723? It is indeed the year in which Benjamin Franklin arrived in Philadelphia aged 17. It is indeed the year in which JS Bach moved to Leipzig to take up the position of Cantor of the Thomasschule in the Thomaskirche there. But for us in St Ann’s Church Dawson Street, 1723 is the year in which the bread shelves, one of which remains to this day, always stocked and restocked with bread, were installed in this church as a gift of The Right Honourable Theophilus Lord Newtown of Newtown Butler. This was his gift to help to feed the poor people of the rapidly expanding city. Rapid expansion is always exciting and progressive. It also happens to the disadvantage and the detriment of many. Every new development and decision come with a cost as well as with a benefit. And it is the destitute who go to the wall first and who need help first. This act, this event, this initiative on the part of Lord Newtown reminds us of how much tidier religion, the church and Christianity itself would be for many with tidy minds and tidy computers were it not for the poor and the needy. It pushes us further and forces us to remember that the poor and the needy are the first port of call for Christian self-understanding and for personal self-understanding within the love of God for the world of God’s creation. It pushes us to the ecology of response beyond reaction, of involvement beyond information. As we are told in St Matthew 25.40: *Truly I tell you: anything you did for one of my brothers and sisters here, however insignificant, you did for me.* The first point for us is that nobody is insignificant. The further point is that significance is expressed in the human interchange of giving and receiving with all grace and with no shame on any side. Across the centuries and down to this day, this church of St Ann has continued to address this need and to serve this body of people in a variety of evolving and appealing ways. It leads our diocese in public generosity on the street and in public sharing of public giving. And, under the guidance of its rector of today, it is ready to launch out again in whatever is the appropriate expression of bread shelves here and now for the fourth century of its life. It is ready and willing to take the tradition in all its many facets and to let that tradition set the pace three hundred years on.

PUBLIC SPACE AND PUBLIC VOICE

St Ann’s takes its place in the commercial and the governmental quarter of Dublin. This is how history has dealt us its hand. What once was the private residence of The Duke of Leinster, when he made his fashionable exit from the North Side to the less fashionable South Side, is still Leinster House but dedicated to a national and an international public function of government. While the focus of business changes readily and relentlessly all the time, business continues vibrantly and competitively in the streets around this church. They are the go-to place for visitors and tourists alike. Our three-hundredth anniversary has to ask of us questions about appropriate engagement with societal and cultural issues of the day. We are situated in the heart of these issues in the heart of this part of the city. In such a way as this, St Ann’s Church can be prophetic in its own person as it facilitates a generation with spiritual needs and longings, but increasingly devoid of spiritual vocabulary or spiritual narrative, towards self-understanding and towards public altruism through its own generous public Christian witness. People want to know things – let St Ann’s help them to know. People want to do things – let St Ann’s help them to do. People recognize a personal and spiritual deficit in their lives – let St Ann’s help them to find God in finding themselves as they journey through life. We can do this by our confidence in public worship, by our kindness in welcoming visitor and stranger, by our care for poor and wealthy alike and by our offering consistently good quality debate and discussion of areas and issues that shape our society and shape our church. It is the engagement and the intersection that matter to us; and the debate and action that follow from them are what we want. In this way too St Ann’s can take up the instinct and the intuition of the bread shelves and their crossing the divide between those inside and outside the church. In this way in 2023, St Ann’s can do what deacons did in Jerusalem in the earliest days of the church: serve the city in its contemporary needs.

WHAT IT IS TO BUILD AND WITH WHOM DO YOU BUILD?

*… so that the Christian family may be built up, recognizing the diverse gifts of all its members.* These words echo into the life of the Church of `Ireland and into every church from The Service of Confirmation. They challenge us inside the church to take ourselves seriously and to acknowledge who we are and what we can do; to accept that we cannot all do the same things; to understand that we cannot do these things alone; and to accept that we are a work in progress. For a church that was once an uneasy Establishment, and in many respects has never quite forgotten the more flattering aspects of such status, the last of these is the most challenging: to accept that we are a work in progress. The church building is the go-to place to which we come week by week and day by day to worship, to give thanks and to derive inspiration in being built up to go out again and to share in the building of society in the city where we live. Everyone has something to give; everyone has something to share; everyone is needed; and everyone is valued. A church holds together stability and adventure. Both are tempered by each other. Both are invited to take their unique gifts and share them in likely and unlikely places with the words of Isaiah the prophet as read by Jesus the prophet in the synagogue at Nazareth setting the pace: *The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; to let the broken victim go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.* (St Luke 4.18, 19) In a contemporary idiom, this is St Ann’s at its best and at its most open hearted.

St Ann’s, as a church building, finds itself at the heart of a very special part of the city. As the rugby referee says when he or she senses delay and prevarication between scrum and scrum-half: Use it! Sir Joshua Dawson and Viscount Molesworth were responsible for developing in rapid succession Dawson Street, Grafton Street, Ann Street and Molesworth Street all of which remain full of life to this day. Generations of visitors have been attracted by the stunning view of St Ann’s from the point at which Grafton Street breaks to let Ann Street unfold and lead us to the imposing and inviting great red doors of this church. The Royal Irish Academy is our immediate neighbour as is The Lord Mayor of Dublin. Leinster House is the seat of national government and of international engagement and influence in Europe and beyond and is also our neighbour. The Huguenots, refugees from religious persecution in their day and whose contribution to Irish life is incalculable, are buried in large numbers almost no distance from the church building along Merrion Row. And yet in the midst of all of this versatile and adaptable splendour of architecture and of activity, the poor are always with us and we come back constantly to Theophilus Lord Newtown’s bread shelves – and why wouldn’t we?

WHERE TO?

Opportunities present themselves to everyone associated with St Ann’s every day. The beginning of a new century of life falls at our feet in our own lifetime. It is for us to build relationship, to foster partnerships and to confirm our commitment to being the church in and for the city of Dublin. We are entirely realistic in knowing that we cannot do this on our own or by ourselves – nor would we want to. Partnerships are our present; friendships are our future. It is for reasons such as this that I am so delighted that people from so many walks of life have joined today, making a significant and special effort to do so, joined in this celebration of who you are and who we are – and who we are yet to become together.

Today is a day of rejoicing, a day of hospitality, a day of renewing existing relationships and creating new relationships. The bread shelves still, three hundred years on, point us to a constant theme that does not leave our lives or our lips: the response to need and the relationship of giver and receiver. I want to thank and to congratulate all who have custodianship of this church for the work you have done; for the work you will undertake in making the life of St Ann’s known more and more widely across the city and across the world.

Psalm 127.2: *Unless the Lord keeps the city, the guard keeps watch in vain.*

The psalmist is firmly of the belief that house and city move forward together. Under the guiding hand of its rector, Canon Paul Arbuthnot, St Ann’s is committed to making its unique contribution as together we make this unique journey.