**Institution of Reverend Ása Björk Ólafsdóttir O’Hanlon Friday 5 January 2018**

At Ása’s service of introduction nearly five years ago a Bishop filled this slot. Either her standards have fallen or it just proves that most Bishops are still on holiday in the first week of January so Asa had to resort to asking me! When she rang she didn’t warn me not to go on for too long but if I accepted there was one condition. I am not going to reveal what that was, so only she will know afterwards whether I fulfilled them or not.

Like me you may have wondered **why** we have had to gather here at all tonight. The most

fundamental question is: do we really need another rector in an area where there are already far too many rectors and too many parish units basically covering the same area and ministering for the most part to dwindling and ageing congregations. **Is there a plan**? Was this decision reached for the right reasons or just to maintain the status quo? Having decided that another rector **WAS** needed what then has changed since Asa’s service of introduction? Why was she not instituted into this incumbency five years ago? Then we could have all stayed at home tonight in front of the fire finishing off that last box of Christmas chocolates. At the time there was talk of a second role for Asa in the Diocese, that of Ministry development officer, but for whatever reason nothing came of that. That is all now history of course and so here we are on the eve of the Epiphany.

We all know and love the story of the wise men and how they followed a star which led them to the baby Jesus. It conjures up Christmas card images in our minds of kings wearing fine robes and crowns, of camels and exotic gifts, of three foreigners-arriving hot on the heels of the shepherds to pay homage to a baby lying in a manger. However, whilst we may **THINK** we know the story if you take a closer look it tells us none of those things. There is no mention at all of a manger for instance, the text makes it very clear the wise men entered a house so by the time they saw Jesus, he could well have been a toddler, walking around.

For Christmas I was given this gift. It is probably no longer considered very politically correct and it could be argued it reinforces gender stereotypes, but please take it in the

humorous spirit intended. Three wise **women** would have…...asked directions, arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, brought practical gifts ….and there would be peace on earth. The words are surrounded by tiny red hearts, the symbol of love of course. I thought to myself –Asa.

Like the characters in the Epiphany story Asa is wise, intelligent, learned, exotic, a foreigner who set out some years ago on an unknown journey when she decided to come to Ireland. That took tremendous courage, and faith, to leave behind many of her loved ones and all that was familiar to her to step out into the unknown. She came, not from the East, but from the North West. I doubt if she followed a star but she eventually arrived in Dun Laoghaire via a stopover in Co Meath. For most of us she is probably the first person from Iceland we have ever met. She came here from a different country with a different culture, a different language and from a different Christian tradition having been ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Iceland **but thankfully she is no longer a stranger**. She has many gifts and can multi task with ease. Some weeks ago I travelled with her to Limerick for an Institution. As we were going along the motorway she suddenly reached into a rather large bag and produced a huge ball of wool and some needles and without pausing for breath continued the conversation whilst knitting a scarf without needing a pattern. What was really amazing was how she was also able to keep control of the car as well! I jest about that last bit, fake news; I was actually doing the driving!

Asa sees herself as a bit of a rebel. Her sometimes unconventional ways can provoke some interesting reactions. She is not always what people expect of someone in ordained ministry **and thank God for that**. I had a prosecco fuelled conversation with a parishioner of mine the other night who still has not got over the fact that on her last visit to St Paul’s Glenageary to lead an act of worship in my absence, she kissed him!! I am not suggesting for one minute he did not enjoy it but I am now rather anxious that he appears to want me to start kissing him too! Asa is also extremely thoughtful and considerate, since arriving in Dun Laoghaire she has even gone to the trouble of marrying Martin, an Irishman, which now means that the majority of people in this country can at last at least correctly pronounce and spell **part** of her name!

Asa has a huge pastoral heart, she has gotten to know this place and its people very well and she cares deeply about all those in her charge and she has been very diligent and hard

working in her efforts to fulfil her responsibilities and of course that will continue. As we all know since her arrival here Asa has also put a lot of emphasis on reaching out beyond the walls of this building and beyond the needs of the congregation here. With the setting up of the dining room in the parish hall, she and her band of volunteers offered free hot meals to the homeless, the marginalised and the lonely. That has been a pioneering ministry amongst people many of us can easily forget or turn our backs on. Although the work of the Dining room has since been absorbed into the outreach of CrossCare I know this ministry will always be and remain a priority for Asa. She will continue to work in very practical ways to offer hope and new life to those less fortunate than ourselves. Asa encourages all of us by her actions and by her example to live out the words of the king in Matthew 25 “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me”.

Family is incredibly important to Asa, her own extended and scattered biological family of course, but also her parish family, the community family here in Dun Laoghaire, and the family of the universal church. Such is her charisma she has even managed to get five

local Church of Ireland clergy to work together more closely in recent years, **now that is some achievement!** It speak volumes about her priorities in life that her dining room table is a recycled door. She has an inclusive, open door policy of ministry, at times, some may say, an unhinged approach, all are welcome, hospitality is freely offered, regardless of status, background or faith, she is here to serve and to selflessly help in any way that she can.

The word Epiphany means manifestation or revelation, literally “a drawing back of the veil”. This is the revelation of the profound mystery of Christ as the saviour of the **whole** human race, Jew and Gentile. This is not just a nice story of a once off event over two thousand years ago, it speaks to us, across time, and culture and race, as powerfully today as it did then. For it offers profound insights as to **how** Jesus can be **revealed** more fully in **our** lives, of what His being our Saviour **actually** means for us as individuals and as community, it **shows us** what it takes for us to come into a closer relationship with God.

There is much we can learn from both the journey made by the wise men and from the journey Ása has taken that had led to her ministry here amongst us. There has been an openness to **new** things, a constant search to know more, and to recognise seemingly

ordinary things as signs from God. It is almost a cliché to describe our faith in terms of a

journey. For the wise men, and for Ása that journey was a very physical setting out into the unknown, they were foreigners going into another country, they faced many challenges in the search for wisdom and truth, but this did not deter them. **They were prepared to take risks**. We are called to do the same, our faith must be more than something we have inherited or learned, we must explore it for ourselves, be prepared to work, study, pray, seek, brace ourselves to be challenged. Even then, it is **not** enough to know just **facts** about Jesus, we must **encounter Him** for ourselves.

**Where is he who has been born king?** asked the wise men all those years ago. That is our life’s work as Christians, to **search** for the whereabouts of Christ in **every** situation, to see where and how and in what area he wishes to be king. Finding him means taking risks. So **who is this child for us today**? This child is new life, promise, possibility, tomorrow, hope, change, challenge, all these things and more.

**Who is Herod today?** Herod is every attitude which **fears** new life, which wishes to kill the future, to hold it back, Herod still lives and threatens us all. So as we move into another new year, and embark on a new chapter in the life of this parish, we are challenged by the

story of the Epiphany to seek out the child in our own lives and in our own time, and to

confront and overcome the Herod’s of our time and place.

Ása’s ministry will continue to challenge each one of us to move out of our comfort zones. Let’s be honest, on the surface the parish of Christ Church, Dun Laoghaire and Asa hardly seem like a match made in heaven. Some of us have wondered at times are they even

compatible? Is this not a bit like trying to force a square peg into a round hole? I have

absolutely no doubt that over the past five years there have been tensions, even disagreements at times, but then surely if there are no tensions and no disagreement then no one involved is growing in their faith. Within the Church of Ireland we tend to view those we perceive as being a bit different with suspicion. We then set about trying to change them, holding up our traditions as sacred and tell them in no uncertain terms that this is the way we do things in the Church of Ireland, you had better conform or else!! Signs of life, acts of spontaneity, gestures of welcome and hospitality often scare us to death, and die we will, if we do not change our attitudes and our approach, there are already enough museums in Dun Laoghaire! If you are tempted to try and change Asa, if you long for her to conform and wish she would just put all her energies into maintaining that which makes you feel secure and comfortable, **please stop**, you are only wasting your time and your energy. For one thing, Asa is stronger than that, but more importantly **we NEED Ása to remain being Ása.**

If the Holy Spirit has really been at work in this protracted process then she is without doubt here amongst us for a **reason**, she has been appointed Rector here for a **reason**. God is working through her to give us glimpses of where our priorities in the ministry of the church should lie today. We are not a minority interest club whose sole purpose is to preserve those things that are important to us personally. We are here to proclaim the Good News of

Jesus Christ to the often cynical, disinterested and distracted world that lies beyond our doors. I believe that Asa has, and will continue, to have a leading role in showing us some very

practical ways in which we can make a real difference and allow more people to experience the new life and hope that Christ offers.

We gather tonight in a spirit of thankfulness for the inclusiveness of the ministry Ása has

already given here in the hope that God will continue to bless her work both within this

parish and within the community of which it is part.