

In the name of the living God - Father Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

It is such a joy and a delight to be with you here today, to share this very special celebration of St Brigid's 1500 anniversary, with you.

I bring with me the greetings, the love and the prayers of my own church, St Bride's, Fleet Street, which stands in the very heart of the City of London. My church is most famous today for its unique ministry to journalists throughout the world. But our roots are far more ancient. We were founded in the sixth century by Irish religious and given that our dedication is to St Brigid of Kildare, it's highly likely that our origins lie here - and that this cathedral is in fact our true Mother Church.

At St Bride's we are incredibly proud of our Irish roots and the rediscovery of our Celtic spiritual heritage continues to be a source of inspiration and vision and hope.

And how very timely this celebration of Brigid 1500 is for us all! Because our world has never been in more urgent need of Brigid and of all that she represents. For her's truly is a voice for our age! Human beings are extraordinary, marvellous and deeply complex creatures. We are, as the psalmist says, wonderfully made. Capable of infinite creativity, breath taking artistry, acts of extraordinary love and compassion and we flourish in context of peace and harmony. Tragically, we are also unparalleled in our capacity to wreak destruction and havoc, desecrating God's wonderful creation, wilfully plundering its precious resources, committing untold acts of injustice and cruelty and brutality against our fellow human beings. It is a terrible irony that only a human being is capable of being inhuman.

The story of Adam and Eve in the Old Testament nails this timeless truth with profound insight. For it is when we aspire to be "as God," lauding it over the natural world and forgetting that we are part of God's precious creation, it is when we have everything we could possibly want or need, but squander it when envy tempts us to reach out for still more. It is then that the forces of chaos are unleashed and spiral out of control bringing violence, mistrust, injustice, guilt and shame in their wake. And of course, I myself am complicit in all of that - as are we all.

The Christian story tells how all of that was thrown into reverse, when God in Christ did the opposite. Divesting himself of all power and, in utter vulnerability, taking to himself all the hatred and the rage that the world could fling at him and responding instead with compassion: *Father forgive them for they know not what they do*. But that alternative Truth then had to be taken up and lived out by those who followed him - which is precisely where Brigid comes in.

Brigid is an elusive figure whose story weaves together fact and embellishment in ways that we can no longer disentangle. But the core features of all that she represents remain timeless and changeless. So we see Brigid's connectedness with creation, of the natural environment. She was renowned for her love and respect for animals. And it's wonderfully appropriate, that her cross is traditionally woven from straw or rushes from the very fabric of Earth.

We so need that healing of our relationship with creation.

And she was legendary for her gift for hospitality which entails embracing the stranger - the very person whom we regard as 'other,' the one who is not like us, the one whom we might so readily regard with suspicion and enmity.

We so need that healing of relationship with one another.

And in her own day, in a world in which women had no legal status, few rights and little voice, she earned the respect of all who encountered her - an authority that was hard won and that shows her courage. It is so significant that here in Ireland you are now recognizing her as your 'Matron Saint' alongside Saint Patrick - because the rich and creative complementarity of our differences, including those of gender, enriches us all. We so need that healing too.

Brigid is a sign of peace. Violence is easy. Committing ourselves to striving for peace and reconciliation with those from whom we are alienated and estranged, is unimaginably hard. Because true peacemaking can never be achieved by ignoring or underplaying our differences - particularly when those differences and those divisions are generations old and mired in centuries of bloodshed and injustice and mistrust. Rather, as Christ has shown us, it is only by opening ourselves up to the reality of that darkness and by embracing the pain of the other that we can begin to walk the path of peace. It is a costly business. But Christ's command to us was to *love your enemy, to pray for those who persecute you, to do good to those who hate you* - just as the Good Samaritan bound the wounds of a man who would have been his persecutor.

At noon today, in my church in Fleet Street, we shall be observing the Pause for Peace - alongside our Catholic brothers and sisters from the Irish Chaplaincy in London - as well as members of L'Arch Ireland. And it is so fitting that there, as here, we shall be doing so ecumenically - because Brigid predates, by many centuries, everything that now divides our traditions.

So in that sense, we are united in and through her - simply because she belongs to us all.

The medallion that I am wearing is the badge of our Guild of St Bride, which dates back to 1375 as a parish Guild dedicated to St Brigid. At its heart is a Celtic cross surrounded by a circle of flame representing Brigid's perpetual fire. The symbol of Brigid's fire here in Kildare continues to speak to us today, of the light of Christ that shines on in the darkness - a darkness that cannot overcome it.

Every morning at St Bride's, we offer a prayer which includes these words: *As we rejoice in the gift of this new day, so may the light of your presence, O God, set our hearts on fire with love for you.*

And may God in his infinite love and wisdom, touch us anew with the fire of St Brigid - and inspire us by her example- that we may take her passion, her light and her fire out into a world that so desperately needs it.

Canon Alison Joyce, Rector, St Bride's Church, Fleet Street, City of London.

Delivered in St Brigid's Cathedral, Kildare, Ireland on Feast of St Brigid, 1st February 2024.



Canon Joyce, Bishop Pat Storey, Bishop Denis Nulty, and Dean Isobel Jackson participating in the service.

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