

*“The Contemplative Gaze”*

World Day of Peace, 2018

Homily of Bishop McGuckian for the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, January 7<sup>th</sup>, 2018

Parish of Carrigart

In today’s gospel we are invited to see Jesus standing in the Jordan river, at the moment of the beginning of his earthly ministry, just after baptism by John the Baptist. We imagine the Heavenly Father gazing on this same Jesus, a human being like us in every possible way except sin, and the Father recognises in him his very own divine life. He says ‘You are my son, the beloved; my favour rests on you.’ The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove unites the Father and the Son.

You could say that it is the ‘contemplative gaze’ of the Father that lets him recognise the divinity of the man Jesus. I deliberately use the term ‘contemplative gaze’ this morning because Pope Francis used it in a very significant way in his message for the World Day of Peace, 1<sup>st</sup> January, 2018. Francis calls all Christians to look on the world with a ‘contemplative gaze’ – another phrase for looking on the world with the eyes of God. When we do look on the world in that new way we will see it transformed.

Pope Francis is specifically thinking this year of the terrible crisis of Migrants and Refugees that faces the world in our day and which is not going to stop any time soon. There are currently at some estimates, 250 million migrants in the world, of whom as many as 50 million are Refugees. That is 50 million people driven by dire circumstances beyond their control to flee persecution, war or famine - to flee their homes and seek sanctuary elsewhere.

‘All the indicators available to the international community suggest,’ writes Pope Francis, ‘that global migration will continue for the future. Some consider this a threat. For my part I ask you to view it with confidence as an opportunity to build peace.’

In our fallen humanity it is natural for us to see the arrival of needy people who are very different in background, sensibility and culture to us as a grave threat to our security and prosperity. Pope Francis, speaking with nothing but the power of the Gospel, asks us to see it not as a threat but as a gift, ‘an opportunity to build peace.’

What Francis calls us to here is not natural; it is the work of grace. It is seeing the world with new eyes because of the coming of Jesus. It is looking on the world with what he calls ‘a contemplative gaze’.

Let us remember the heavenly Father looking on the man standing in the Jordan river and seeing his own Divine Son, his beloved.

When Jesus looked on the men and women of his time he didn't see strangers but brothers and sisters. Lepers who came to him hoping to be healed were not a fearful source of contamination but his beloved friends needing his gentle touch.

The 'contemplative gaze' is a whole new way of being in the world. It starts with the Father looking with love on his son. It spreads out from Jesus his son to you and me. Jesus wants to be in relationship with you and me. Just as he heard his Father say 'You are my beloved; my favour rests on you' it is the purpose of Jesus' life that you and I would hear the same message; 'you are my beloved; my favour rests on you.' This is a dynamic that must not end there. If we let ourselves be part of the dynamic we will look on the world around us with new eyes. Circumstances and people whom we might be tempted to see as threats, as strangers, as enemies, will come to be brothers and sisters, friends whom we will look at with merciful eyes because that is how we are viewed ourselves.

This dynamic of the 'contemplative gaze' is why we are here this morning. God's grace is inviting each one of us, from whatever our starting point is right now, to be caught up in this dynamic. There are so many situations in our personal lives, our families and our local community where the contemplative gaze is relevant. Left to our own devices and capacities we will see people as threats to be shunned and avoided but the whole point of Christmas and of today's feast is that we are called to something new.

Just a little reflection can help each one of us to recognise where the contemplative gaze is called for in our personal lives.

This year Pope Francis is calling us to go further than our own personal lives. He is inviting us to care about the tragedy that afflicts vast numbers of people driven from their homes throughout the world. Millions of those people are turning to us in wealthy Europe seeking help and welcome. Unless we, by the grace of God, can come to see them with new eyes, as a gift rather than a threat, we will have missed a great opportunity and our world will be so much the poorer for it.