

1. Thank you to Dean Dermot Dunne, and to Dr Margaret Daly-Denton for the invitation to be here today, the fourth Sunday of Advent, coinciding this year, as it can often do, with the winter solstice. I hope these words will be acceptable to you here in this sacred place.
2. In these weeks of Advent, especially when we were children perhaps, we encountered Jesus' family and imagine them in narratives and plays often as rather odd, if intriguing, people in their own right, even as they also symbolically prefigure the arrival of the Messiah. Mary his mother, the young woman who is as a sign from God already announced in Isaiah, something we are reminded of in today's reading. And earlier in Advent we heard of his enigmatic and wild cousin John, the voice crying in the desert, proclaiming the imminent coming of the anointed one, long anticipated and still awaited. Who knew that this could happen, even after 400 years of silence? Yet here is John the Baptist, John the Forerunner, the new Elijah, harbinger of the Messiah: out in the desert wearing clothes made of camel hair and eating locusts and wild honey, confronting religious leaders, baptizing and preaching righteousness.

Today however, on this fourth Sunday, we meet a very different man, Mary's husband Joseph. Joseph of the House of David, Joseph who was faithful to the law, Joseph who calmly listens to angels in his dreams, that wisely saves his marriage (and later saves his family, when they become refugees, in the flight into Egypt). This brief introduction to Joseph is almost all of we know of him. We don't hear much more in the Biblical text about him, other than that he was the resilient protector of his family, a carpenter, or τέκτων (tektōn), an artisan, who provided for his family through his skills as a builder<sup>1</sup>.

What unlikely particularities and ponderable complications, much like families everywhere.

They are all also theological in meaning, in that they fulfil what the Lord said through the prophet: that the Messiah will be recognized by the events of his arrival; a descendent of

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<sup>1</sup> And likely a significant person in his society.

David, of the royal bloodline; called Emmanuel, God with us; and named Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.

These are texts of patient endurance, endurance in the face of the as-yet unknown, or even in the impossible but yet hoped for. And they are narratives of trust, trust that promises made will be fulfilled. That something new will happen in creation. And now this 'new thing' that God does in creation is revealed unambiguously in the incarnation. Later, in his ministry, Jesus aligned himself strongly with the creation theology of his own inherited scriptures, interpreting creatureliness as a blessing, that we can in a new creation live in justice and righteousness.

3. And yet it might seem strange that the origins of the tradition of celebrating Jesus' birth are lost in history or at least much debated. The extrabiblical evidence for an early dating of the celebration is sparse, and it was his ministry, miracles, passion and resurrection that were of central concern in early centuries.

It was, it seems, not until the 4<sup>th</sup> century that the 25<sup>th</sup> of December in the West and January the 6<sup>th</sup> in the East, was generally adopted, among other possible dates.

This may have been in order to make vital connections between Christ's two natures: human and divine. Human as evidenced in his birth, and divine, in the epiphany; his revelation to the Gentiles, to the Magi. In that regard it can be considered an intra-Christian development that may have become widespread after the Council of Nicea, 1700 years ago this year.

The other, rather appealing tradition about the dating of Christmas, brings us back to John the Baptist (and his significance cosmologically) who points away from himself to Jesus as the Messiah. John clearly announces (in the Gospel of John the Evangelist, John 3:30) that He (Jesus) must increase but I (John) must decrease, because John is "not the Messiah, but has been sent ahead of him". And from the winter to the summer solstice the days lengthen, and the nights grow shorter, and then for the next six months the pattern is reversed. The birth of John the Baptist was said to have taken place six months before that of

Jesus, placing John's birth at the summer solstice. And his birthday is celebrated on St John's Eve notably in the West of Ireland, in Mayo, and Connemara, Roscommon, Cork and Kerry and Donegal, with the lighting of fires at sundown. At least by the late sixth century, the Nativity of John the Baptist (24 June) had become an important feast, counterbalancing at midsummer the midwinter feast of Christmas.

The other long-standing assumption is that the date was chosen to Christianize an older Roman festival in honour of *Sol Invictus*, the invincible Sun. Although this is not that likely to be the case, and given the evidence of early Homilies and liturgical practices, the implication is that there is nothing in common between these early Roman, 'pagan', practices and the dating of Jesus' birth.

But maybe that is not the whole story:

the sun, and the moon, are cosmic bodies whose appearances follow clear patterns that have guided both Jewish and Christian calendars for millennia. And the winter solstice serves well as the birthday of Christ. The sun is a cosmic and temporal symbol, as well as an allegory for eternity, and the homilies makes vital connections in their calculations, referring to Christ as the 'true sun of justice.' The created universe also speaks God's revelatory Word.

#### 4. Like Joseph we also await the true sun of justice.

And we also live in turbulent times.

[I think that might be worse than living in interesting times, and it would be so much better if it was not the case.]

The scope of our reach has been enlarged so dramatically that earth systems are hurtling out of the relatively stable climate conditions we have enjoyed as a species since the end of the last ice age, and into the unknown. This is not an allegory. There is little time. We may be the first generation to have some grasp of the implications, and the last to be able to do something about it.

There is the unprecedented need for international cooperation to protect the integrity of the earth, and all the creatures that live here, and to agree terms on which peoples can live well together within planetary boundaries.

And our faith communities have belatedly but also rapidly and seriously started to rethink their commitments in response.

The Church of Ireland has in recent times added a fifth mark of mission namely: “to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth”<sup>2</sup>.

Pope Francis’s letters *Laudato Si’; On care for our Common Home* (2015) and *Laudate Deum* (2023) have been instrumental in fostering fossil fuel divestment and biodiversity conservation and restoration. And these are addressed to all people of good will.

We do not need to retreat into a less material version of world history in our theology but rather could learn how to rematerialize, in a thousand different ways our belonging to the Earth<sup>3</sup>. The desire for the world to continue is not ‘a cult of nature’, or paganism (negatively understood), or an error, or a moral failing but what the incarnation and the Gospel message pointed to.

And this is the hope: for a technology worthy of the creation—for care in response to fragility. Caring for each other and our common home also engenders a kind of grounded cosmopolitanism (as it might be described in philosophy). Grounded because we recognize ourselves as earth-dwellers and cosmopolitan because it can foster our competence to communicate, as agents, capable of creating just relations and in hope unprecedented co-operation across the disciplines. Where the ‘cultural riches of different peoples, their art, their poetry, their interior life and spirituality’, and ‘no branch of the sciences, no form of wisdom ...can be left out’ (from *Laudato Si’*).

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<sup>2</sup> Rev Trevor Sargent has written on this.

<sup>3</sup> Or as Dr John Feehan might put it, we need to cultivate slightly less inadequate ways of looking at the world, and Rev David White might put it, allow ourselves to be gardened as well as to garden.

5. We are here because Advent promises something transformative in history?  
Not the destruction of the earth but its transformation.

Unexpectedly Joseph appears in the text, not as loud or even disruptive as John the Baptist, but no less significant. The extraordinary in the ordinary.

He was by these accounts a patient and a wise man. An impoverished provider, a maintainer, also a *τέκτων*, a builder in wood and plaster, a man of dreams and imagination, not paralyzed by the weight of history or tradition, or by trouble and disaster, but already working in quiet confidence in light of and towards justice to come.

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