

**DROMANTINE RETREAT AND CONFERENCE CENTRE**  
**SATURDAY MAY 8, 2010**  
**COMPANIONS ON THE JOURNEY**  
**Celebrating 100 years of Ecumenical Pilgrimage**  
*How far have we come?      How far can we go?*  
***Talk By Rev. Ruth Patterson***

It is, I believe, no coincidence as we mark the centenary of the start of the ecumenical movement at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh 1910 that we meet in another place of mission, a place where people are sent forth on journeys of faith and hope and vision carrying within them the challenge and the vocation to be agents of transformation wherever God leads them. The Society of African Missions, who so consistently and generously make this beautiful centre a place of hospitality where there is a welcome for diversity and room enough for all has given huge encouragement, not only to those of us who are gathered here today, but to countless numbers who have passed through their doors, rested at their inn and continued on their pilgrimage.

We meet also, I believe, with a great sense of humility and thanksgiving for the great crowd of witnesses who surround us in the unseen world, those who throughout the ages have not only paid lip service to the prayer of Jesus that we might be one so that the world would believe, but who have incarnated those words in their own lives, a journey that has often cost them very dear. The responses to the question 'How far have we come?' contain within them enormous gratitude but also, to a greater or lesser degree, regret and even shame.

As to the question 'How far can we go?' I have to say that the Kingdom of Heaven is the limit and that I choose to stand on the side of the outrageous hope already won for us by Jesus Christ crucified and risen that we are already one. It's just that our awareness levels most of the time are practically non-existent therefore we do not sense the urgency or recognize that we already have our chief evangelistic tool within our grasp.

I would like to try to address both questions this afternoon with you, my companions on the journey, by turning to that endless source of inspiration, namely Scripture. I want to look at two different journeys, one from the Old Testament, one from the New, one of two women, one of two men as a sort of paradigm of this pilgrimage to which we have committed ourselves.

Before we join our pilgrims I would like to share with you some words from Christina Rossetti, expressing the apprehensions and encouragements of such a journey, that have been relentlessly in my mind ever since I began to reflect on this afternoon.

Does the road wind up-hill all the way?  
Yes, to the very end.

Will the day's journey take the whole long day?  
From morn to night, my friend.

But is there for the night a resting place?  
A roof for when the slow dark hours begin.

May not the darkness hide it from my face?  
You cannot miss that inn.

Shall I meet other wayfarers at night?  
Those who have gone before.

Then must I knock, or call when just in sight?  
They will not keep you standing at the door.

Shall I find comfort, travel-sore and weak?  
Of labour you shall find the sum.

Will there be beds for me and all who seek?  
Yes, beds for all who come.

Probably one of the best loved stories in the Old Testament is that of Ruth and Naomi. It has something of vital importance to tell us about the Church, about how we need each other on the journey, and about our committed inter-relatedness, whether we fully recognize that or not. It's a story of love and faithfulness, of courage and the willingness to risk. It encompasses the themes of exile and homecoming, of hardship and provision, of danger and rescue, of self-sacrifice and reward. It's also a love story and, although we do not always care to admit it lest we be labelled sentimental, it has a happy ending – which is very satisfying! It begins and ends in Bethlehem. And while it is the story of the love between Naomi and Ruth, her daughter-in-law, and of the love between Ruth and Boaz, in the third dimension, it is also part of the love story of God for his world – as we shall see. It is, in essence, a story of companions on a journey, a story of outrageous hope – and a hope that is not disappointed.

You remember the 'Once upon a time' of Elimelech and Naomi, how they lived in Bethlehem in the region of Ephratha (which, ironically, means 'fertile'), and how there was a severe famine in the country.

\*They took the decision to set out with their two sons and to journey to Moab where there was enough to eat. It must have been hard for them to leave all that was familiar and dear behind, to go to a land that would have been regarded by Israel as hostile and pagan, but necessity is a hard master. They had no way of knowing that God was already weaving a tapestry of something far, far greater than they could ever imagine or even think of. All they were aware of was their need, the struggle of an ordinary family in hard times for the basic necessities of life. Some time after they settled in Moab, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi a widow. Her two sons married into the local culture, and life went on. Bethlehem must have seemed very far away, a dear but dim memory that it was better not to think of too much lest she be overwhelmed with homesickness and loss. But then tragedy struck again. Her two sons, Mahlon and Kilion also died. To be without husband or sons or any means of family support in those times and in that ancient culture, (as well as in many places today), meant destitution. \*

Then Naomi heard that the famine in Judah was over, that Ephratha was living up to its name once more – a fertile place with abundant crops - so she makes the decision to go back home and her two daughters-in law, Orpah and Ruth, set out with her. The Bible says, "They took the road that would lead them back to Judah." If you like, they set out on pilgrimage. On the way, however, Naomi urges Orpah and Ruth to return to their homeland. She is convinced that there would be no future for them in Judah. (She is deeply appreciative of all they have been to her and her family but now is decision time, parting time and, hard as it seemed, it was the only sensible thing to do.) After protestations, Orpah turns back – but not Ruth.

There follows one of the greatest statements of love, commitment and fidelity in the whole of scripture. You will all be familiar with it, "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live I will live. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God, too. Wherever you die, I will die and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death separate us."

Naomi eventually yields. How Ruth's generosity of spirit and willingness to leave behind all that she had known out of love for the older woman must have warmed Naomi's heart and made the journey more bearable. It actually was a nurturing of the tiny spark of hope that was in her, the only spark left after so much tragedy –

that just perhaps, when they reached their destination, something might happen to reverse their fortunes. Ruth's selfless decision had already begun the process. It was a long journey for the two women, but, we read, "They went on until they came to Bethlehem." And they arrived there at the beginning of the barley harvest. Their arrival caused a great stir. "Is this really Naomi?" the women asked. The name 'Naomi' actually means 'pleasant.' In light of this, Naomi's response is all the more poignant. She replies, "Don't call me Naomi. Instead, call me Mara, for the Almighty has made life very bitter for me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me home empty. Why should you call me Naomi when the Lord has caused me to suffer and the Almighty has sent such tragedy?" The name 'Mara' means 'bitter.'

You may read again the rest of the story for yourselves, of how Ruth goes to the fields to gather leftover grain and finds herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, a close relative of Elimelech. Naomi is roused from her grief, self pity and depression and, admittedly counting on the integrity and wisdom of Boaz, uses all her skills and knowledge of her own culture to bring about a happy resolution. Ruth, from a different race, culture and religion marries Boaz, is welcomed fully into the community, and, indeed, is given a remarkable blessing by the leaders and people of Israel. Ruth and Boaz have a son, Obed, who was to be the grandfather of David, Israel's greatest king. Ruth, the foreigner, outside the promises of God according to the Israelites, chooses to go on pilgrimage, chooses to let go of all that is familiar to her, chooses to align herself with another 'kingdom' and, in doing so, is instrumental in preparing the way for the Saviour of the world to come. She is listed in the genealogy of Jesus who, in becoming human, was born of David's line.

My question is, "What would have happened if they had never taken the road that led back to Judah, if they had never been companions on the journey? Would God's amazing plan that had been in his mind and heart from before the creation of the world have somehow been stymied if they had not kept on until they came to Bethlehem?" Within the timelessness of God, the God who is the 'I Am', the ever present One, this is, I believe, a valid and challenging question for us today, we who are the people of God.

There is a sense in which Naomi epitomizes 'church' as we know it, certainly in this island. The Church, from having once been in her prime, is now old, tired, disillusioned and, by and large, devoid of hope. People aren't attracted to her any more. In today's world, with so many different interests vying for people's attention, the Church is often the butt of accusations of irrelevancy and hypocrisy,

and, more recently, even betrayal. In terms of spirituality, vision, a prophetic voice, we've been in a time of famine for years, maybe especially at this present moment. From having lived in a time of plenty when, materially and in terms of numbers, we were full, now we are empty and our 'family' is no more. Years ago we might have perceived our life as pleasant. Now it is bitter – with the bitterness not only of the weight of all that has diminished us, but also the bitterness that stems from the half-acknowledged fact that we have been partly to blame. Not being able to face our vulnerability, weakness and guilt, it is so easy to turn instead to self-pity, or project all the negativity outwards and even blame God for where we find ourselves at present. Why couldn't he step in and reverse our fortunes? Why doesn't he do something to bring a harvest once again, to restore what has broken down, and to give us, even just one more time, an outrageous hope?

God doesn't will hard times upon us. God is not the source or cause of our tragedy. He has gifted humankind with the freedom to choose, and so often we make the wrong choices, even, or sometimes especially the Church! But when hard times do happen, God can use them. When they do happen we have a choice as to how we react. In situations of desperation that seem totally devoid of hope, sometimes that is the only freedom left to us, the freedom to choose how we react to such trials. Is it with self pity, bitterness and despair, or is it with courage, faith, love and the audacity to dare to believe that even out of this present darkness something redemptive can yet be born, a light can shine that will be the first stirrings of an unquenchable hope?

Somewhere within Naomi there was a memory of home. It was that memory that held her especially in the years of grieving and exile. It was that memory that one day caused her to make the decision to take the road that would lead her back. Is there within us a memory of home? Are we aware that sometimes, as Herman Hesse would put it, 'our only guide is our homesickness?' After all the years of grieving, exile and loss, both in community and in church, what would cause us to set out once again as a pilgrim people, to take the road that would lead to new birth, to harvest, to a new sense of identity and belonging, to recognize our place again in the redemptive purposes of God? Perhaps it would be to first of all realize that we are not alone, that there are others who are different from us but equally hungry for God and to see his family restored, who would journey with us, if we let them. Ruth was from such a totally different and alien culture, and yet God's purposes would have been unfulfilled without her. For centuries we have fallen into the trap of seeing those who are not of our particular tradition or denomination as somehow being on the margins or

even outside the true people of God. What riches of diversity we have missed! We have so much to share with one another as we make our way back home. God is calling his people from every denomination and none in this age to commit themselves to one another with the same depth of love as Ruth showed to Naomi. He's asking us, for the sake of a world he loves and died to save, to pledge, "Wherever you go, I will go. Wherever you live I will live. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God too." That is, I believe, the pledge we made to God and to the people of God within our particular faith community when we started out on a journey which has led us through times of joy and grief, despair and hope to where we are today, bent maybe but not broken, battered but not defeated.

During the traumatic times through which we are having to live and which in some sense we are being called to bear (and what a hard, hard vocation that is) we may feel sometimes as if our name is Mara meaning bitter. I would want to affirm today that in the hearts of many faithful people our name is still 'pleasant.' We have a choice as to which name we give ourselves – and people will respond to that. I believe with all my heart that out of these harsh times something powerfully redemptive is going to flow to the glory of God and there will be harvest, and new beginnings.

I believe that not just for the religious orders or for the Catholic Church in this country. I believe it for us all. He's calling us to a unity in all our wonderful diversity so that the world might believe. That is to be the sign – that we travel together and that we keep on keeping on in this most awesome of callings – until we come to Bethlehem, back to our roots but paradoxically also to the fulfilment of harvest, back to where it all began, until we come to the House of Bread (which literally is what the word Bethlehem means), to where, within the mercy and the grace of God, we begin again – and God begins again in us, until Jesus is born afresh in us, in me, in you, in Church today. This journey will always be tinged with sadness for there will inevitably be those, like Orpah who turn back to the old ways, unable to be grasped by vision. But let's not condemn them but rather release blessing upon them today in our hearts. As the wisdom of Edinburgh 1910 declared, "Let us be sure we do not commit that most grievous of sins, slandering another Church."

As individuals, and collectively as the people of God, as we dare to go on such a pilgrimage, as we have the courage to believe that we don't know it all, that there's always more of Jesus to be born in us, then we become people of outrageous hope – and we, too, are listed in the genealogy, the family line of Jesus and are a vital part

of the story of God and his dealings with the world. Maybe we won't see the restoration in our lifetime, but that doesn't matter. It's never given to one individual or one community or one order or one church to fulfil the whole purpose of God. Meanwhile there's gleaning to be done, there are journeys to make, there are risks to take, there's the challenge to the wisdom and tested gifting of the years to join with the vision and enthusiasm of this present day to become the place where Jesus can once again be given to the world. Despite all the evidence to the contrary, it's not a terrible time to be alive. It's a time of glorious opportunity, of adventure and of outrageous hope – and it's the only time we have. Ruth and Naomi went on until they came to the House of Bread, to the place of harvest and to their new beginning. Today, in this moment, we are being offered a new beginning as companions on the most important journey we will ever make. I am always humbled and inspired by the words of St. Francis as he was dying, "Let us begin again for up to now we have done nothing!"

Over thirty years ago now, long before the advent of Restoration Ministries, I went with a friend on a pilgrimage around Ireland. What motivated the journey was a desire to communicate, to build relationship, to dispel some preconceived ideas that many of our sisters and brothers in the South had about those of us who were labelled Presbyterian. The memories of that pilgrimage have remained fresh and the friendships made have held and been nurtured, leading to many others. Some of you will have heard me tell this story many times, but allow me now a little indulgence to call it to the forefront of your minds, for it was, not only for me – but for many (although we did not fully know it at the time) – a highly significant journey and, in the unseen world, significant, I believe, for this whole island and this world. It was, in human terms, a small thing to do, to set out to travel around the country and, instead of staying in hotels and guesthouses, to choose to stay in monasteries and convents in the basic belief that something happens, relationships are nurtured when you share a meal, break bread together. And that is exactly what happened.

*(Story)*

Thirty years down the line, those relationships for the most part have held and have been nurtured. They led to others, and, in turn, those led to others, creating a gentle, quiet network of people throughout the island who are (as are we all) still in the joyous process of discovering an identity that transcends denomination, culture, political stance, even sometimes language, namely the oneness that is ours in Jesus Christ – crucified and risen.

Ananias and Saul are our two companions from the New Testament. They help us address the question 'Where do we go from here?' How far can we go? That was perhaps the question Ananias was asking the Lord as he was praying one day in Damascus. The Christian faith had spread rapidly in the early days after Pentecost, so much so that the Jewish leaders felt under threat and a persecution of the believers began. One of the chief perpetrators was Saul, a devout Jew who was determined to have every follower of Jesus arrested and imprisoned, destroyed if possible. News of his zeal had spread everywhere and naturally people were frightened. Now they heard he was on his way to Damascus with an authorization from the high priest to bring every believer back to Jerusalem in chains. This would have been weighing heavily on Ananias's mind as he prayed and waited before God on that eventful day. What was going to happen to them all? Would they be strong enough in their new found faith to withstand persecution from what was now another religious tradition? What would happen to the newly formed church if all the leadership were taken away?

Ananias hadn't a clue what was already happening on the Damascus Road. As he reflected and earnestly prayed, he heard the Lord call him by name. "Yes, Lord!" he replied. There follows one of the most explicit commissions in the New Testament. "Ananias, I want you to get up and go right now to Straight Street, to Judas's house. When you get there you are to ask for a man called Saul of Tarsus. He's praying to me at this very minute and I have told him in a vision that a man called Ananias will be coming to visit him and to lay his hands on him so that he will be able to see again." There was shocked silence as heaven held its breath, and then came the protest, "But, Lord, surely you know all about this man, the terrible things he has done to the followers of the way in Jerusalem, and how he's been authorized to do the same to us here in Damascus." But the Lord said, "Go and do what I say. For this man is my chosen instrument to take my message to Gentiles and to kings as well as to the people of Israel. And I will show him how much he must suffer for me." A really tough assignment! What would you or I have done in the circumstances? Argued a little bit more, prevaricated, made a list of excuses? What we read here are three simple words: 'So Ananias went.'

What trust, what obedience, what courage, what love! But there's more.

Ananias doesn't do things by halves. He finds Saul, lays his hands on him and calls him, "Brother Saul." In that action, in those two words, they became companions on the journey. Brother Saul –

what reconciling, compassionate words to this enemy who believed in the same God but had terrorized and threatened and destroyed so much of what Ananias had held dear. He then prays for the restoration of Saul's sight and for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Luke tells us that instantly something like scales fell from Saul's eyes. He could see, but there was also a greater seeing. Scales had fallen from his heart as well. He was baptised and welcomed into the body of believers. What generosity of spirit they showed and what trust in the mysterious purposes of God! Where did they go from there? Read on in Acts and discover how that trust and obedient faith of Ananias was a crucial step towards a world wide sharing of the Good News.

Think what might, or might not have happened had Ananias not been praying, not been listening or, out of fear or doubt that he had heard correctly, refused to go. It was Saul (or Paul) who first brought the Gospel to Europe and from Europe it then spread to the far corners of the earth. It is not too much to claim that one of the reasons we are here together in Dromantine this afternoon as companions on the journey is because, all those centuries ago, Ananias played his part and was obedient to what was asked of him even although he was afraid and felt so inadequate. This is the only time we read of Ananias in Scripture, but it is enough. He fulfilled his destiny as part of God's great plan. All the rest of his life had been leading up to this point, and, when the moment came, he was ready. I am sure that Paul often looked back to that day, that encounter and his subsequent welcome by the followers of the Way as his inspiration and encouragement when times were tough. From this point there began to be nurtured within him the conviction that Christ himself has made peace between those of diverse cultures, races and national identities. Years later he could write with total assurance: "He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us. His purpose was to make peace – by creating in himself one new person from the two groups. Together as one body, Christ reconciled both groups to God by means of his death, and our hostility towards each other was put to death."

We have reached a certain point in our community life in Ireland for which we give praise and thanks to God. We must never ever take the relative peace that we have been given over the last few years for granted. It was and is a total miracle. But we still have a long way to go in terms of accepting diversity as a gift from God, in dealing with the underlying sectarianism, racism, bitterness and fear that still control many of our attitudes. We are not yet a people who have been forged into one new body – not even in the Church. How can we say we want peace and reconciliation in our

community, let alone in the world, whenever we, in the body of Christ, are still so divided? Not only do we bear the scandal of division but also of so many other revelations that have marred our witness as image bearers of Jesus. In our brokenness we are called, I believe, to stand – or kneel - together. It's a time when our pace on the journey is heavy, the songs are silent and we find ourselves in the strange country of rejection and seeming irrelevance.

Herman Hesse sums this up so well for me in these simple words:

Now we are silent  
And sing no songs any more,  
Our pace grows heavy;  
This was the night that was bound to come.

Give me your hand,  
Perhaps we still have a long way to go.  
It's snowing, it's snowing.  
Winter is a hard thing in a strange country.

When is the time  
When a light, a hearth burned for us?  
Give me your hand,  
Perhaps we still have a long way to go.

We are not called to uniformity. That would be very boring. We are, however, called to unity in diversity which is a very different thing. God is not, I believe, going to let us off the hook on this one. It is central to his agenda, not just for Ireland, but for the world. How do I know that? Well, I defy anyone to read that awesome prayer that Jesus prayed on the night before he died and not be grasped by the truth. The heartbeat of that prayer was that we might be one. Not that we might be one in a cosy holy huddle somewhere away from the rest of the world and its anguish and pain and unbelief, but that we might be one so that the world would believe. This is our chief evangelistic tool and yet we have ignored it for so long or else tinkered with the edges of it. Now is the time to pick it up and to run with it. Whose voice are we listening to? Is it the Lord Jesus, or is our particular ancestral drumbeat still drowning out the very clear command of the Lord? The present moment is all we have and the time, I believe, is urgent. We need to be seriously asking the question, "Where do we go from here?" And, like Ananias, we need to be listening in prayer. Only if we seriously become a praying people will we hear him call us by our name. Only then will we receive specific instructions. From that very real relationship nurtured in prayer we will have obedient

hearts that are not only willing to respond, but to go the extra mile that will always be necessary in a country such as ours. In the fullness of time God can and does use the person or the situation for his purpose. Alleluia!

But I'm not only speaking of us as individual Christians. Can we, in the Church be a collective Annanias, watchful in prayer and ready to get up and go whenever the word comes? The challenges in the years that lie waiting for us will be different from those of earlier years. Unless we are honest about our own fears and brokenness, and at the moment we are very fearful and very broken, we will not hear the voice of the Lord clearly, and if we don't, then we'll not be very bold or courageous. We'll settle back into a comfort zone that still does good work and is quietly there in the background, but we'll not be doing very much bridge building or restoring of waste places or sharing of the real good news which is that of a community reconciled to God and to itself and to its neighbours, both near and far. I have to tell you that I'm too old now to have time to settle back. I want to move in harmony with the Spirit of God, even if that takes me out of the comfort zone. Would you forgive me if I said that most of us here are too old to settle back! We have things to do and places to go for God in this island and this world where we've never been before. We have places to go inside of ourselves also where we've never been before in order that we may be part of the shining company, bearers of the Good News. We haven't a clue of the bigger thing God is doing, but what I do know is that our part is vital and that if we don't do it, something else will slip. Can you picture all heaven holding its breath as it waits for our response? Would we be able to go to those to whom the Lord would send us, formerly perceived 'enemies' and say, with a compassionate and forgiving collective heart, "Brother! Sister, the Lord Jesus has sent us – not a political conviction, not an ancestral drumbeat, not a religious denomination, but the Lord Jesus himself?" In order to do that collectively, perhaps we need a few individual Ananiases to come to us and place their hands on us so that whatever scales are blurring our vision may fall away and we will see clearly. Think hard before you ask for that because it is a lonely and sometimes frightening place to be. In all humility to live with a clearer vision, to 'see' what others do not yet see may lead us to the place of rejection or persecution, but also to the place of encouragement because others will join us.

For the last couple of months I have felt the urge to not simply think of and pray for those friends I encountered on that first pilgrimage, but to remember in the true sense of that word, that is to actively put flesh again on the past by revisiting – not all the places and people for there was not time for that (and one of the

places I don't yet have full access to is heaven where some of them already are!) – but to go to as many of them as I could and simply say “Thank you! Thank you for being there. Thank you for praying. Thank you for seeking to understand what has been happening up here and thank you for being companions on the journey throughout the long years.” There was also a degree of urgency in that many of them now are quite elderly – and isn't it better to let people know while they are still alive that their being in this world – and in our world specifically – has made a difference? So – I did it – about two weeks ago, all 800 miles of it!

Let me share just one little moment out of many grace filled encounters on this recent journey. I was staying in Kylemore Abbey, home to the Benedictine Sisters over many years. Before leaving I walked to the little Gothic Church in the beautiful grounds that surround that magnificent building and found there a laminated leaflet in the pews. On one side were the words of the Twenty Third Psalm; on the other the Prayer of St. Francis. Coincidence or God-incidence? As I walked back along the lakeside to my waiting car, I sensed an affirmation of all that we have sought to do and be through Restoration Ministries throughout the long years. A restoring of souls and being made or transformed – ever so slowly – into instruments of his peace. For every soul restored, we sing alleluia. For even the tiniest seed of love sown into the hard ground of hatred, we thank God. For pardon breaking up the solid rocks of injury, we bless his holy name. For faith pushing through the frozen earth of doubt, glory be to God. For hope bursting from the tomb of despair, our spirits rejoice. For light shining in darkness, even the flickering flame of our small candle that caused the darkness to tremble, praise him. For any joy we have mined as we have picked and dug our way through the strata of so much pain and sadness, not unto us but unto him be the glory.

In every place I stopped around the island I asked the same question of our friends, “What gives you hope for the Church in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Ireland?” Without exception every one of them talked of the importance of community, of the life of faith in ordinary people and of the fact that, beyond everything else and in everything else, God is. If he were not, some of them who have suffered acutely said, “We would be dead.” I also sensed that in every place the Church of Jesus Christ is never left without a witness. It was with a sense of awe and gratitude that I saw that witness right around the country – people whose song is still alleluia who, though buffeted and bruised – as are we – are still companions on a journey that even today, in this moment, gives me outrageous hope.

Now, this moment given to us by God, is the most important moment for us to truly be the Church. I believe with all my heart that this phase that we are now entering is the reason we are in existence in this year of our Lord 2010. All that has gone before is held within the redeeming heart of God but this is our moment and this is our hour to laugh and to cry and to sing out the Good News of hope, of forgiveness, of the restoration of relationships, of a peace that can and will be built because the builder and maker is God. Where do we go from here? God only knows! But that is all that is necessary and, because he does, all is well. The road may wind uphill all the way, right to the very end. But we are companions on the journey with hopefully a more heightened awareness than our forebears at the World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910. The only way is forward and the Kingdom of Heaven is the limit.

Give me your hand. Perhaps we still have a long way to go.