



# The FURROW

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Michael Collins

Ministers and  
Ministry –  
Midwifing  
something *new*  
in an  
Irish context

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# Ministers and Ministry – Midwifing something *new* in an Irish context

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The prophet Habakkuk writes, “*The vision still has its time, presses onto fulfilment and it will not disappoint ... and if it delays, wait for it [2:3]*”. In some ways this captures one of the major challenges of ministry. We grapple to discover God’s vision for the times we live in. Our impatience, or maybe our lack of ability to discern God’s vision, causes us to supplant our view of what we believe ministry should be. Inevitably, this turns out to be a vision with a small ‘v’ for it has but one purpose; to ease our sense of angst as we attempt to regain control.

Sometimes what God has envisioned is just too vast for us. We attempt to tame the panoramic view God gifts us, by viewing life through the keyhole of our limited imagination. All in an effort to manage God’s dream for us and the people we serve. As the Taizé chant from Good Friday reminds us, we need to “*Wait for the Lord*”. Waiting for, and discerning God’s vision for our time is the primary and core task of ministry.

## LETTING GO IN ORDER TO TAKE HOLD OF SOMETHING NEW

We are called to midwife something *new*, and as such expectant patience is required. There is always the temptation for us to fast forward the process so as to present a plan that is manageable, doable and dare I say comfortable. This allows us to occupy ourselves in doing something, but it rarely brings about the conversion of thought, heart and action that our faith promises. As a result we create a kingdom of our own making which will eventually flounder. Remember the words of the prophet, “*God*

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## THE FURROW

*vision presses onto fulfilment*". Therefore at some point we are going to have to engage and encounter it. The alternative is for us to opt out, or to claim that this will see me out, or to think that "Church" as we currently experience it, will do.

As disciples first, and ministers second, we are called to be ready. We are called to be open. We are called to be willing to put ourselves at the service of this life giving vision and mission of God. When we do the end result will be radically different. We are called to align and open ourselves to God's lifegiving and creative love. It is about allowing ourselves to be clay in the hands of the Master Potter. It is about living as a disciple, something the ego rails against. And if our ego has not yet felt the pinch, we are probably nowhere near the point of real and true engagement with God mission. Even the ego must experience the paschal mysteries we celebrate this week, that of life, death and resurrection!

As ministers we are called to be like Mary who after some soul searching said "your will not mine be done". This takes careful discernment, it takes purposeful waiting, it takes courage, and dare I say, radical faith. Anything less will only result in us short cutting the process in the guise of a relentless stream of unending new initiatives. In shortcutting the process we attempt to avoid that "messy middle". We adapt God plan to fit into our vision, while all the time we risk insulating ourselves to the reality of the Paschal Mystery we celebrate each Holy Week. God's lifegiving vision often results in something first having to die. As ministers we sometimes wonder why ministry ceases to be lifegiving for ourselves or for those we serve. We can long for resurrection without wanting to engage the reality of the Cross.

## A SYNODAL CHURCH AT THE SERVICE OF SOMETHING OTHER THAN ITSELF

As ministers, our waiting is not about wasting time or avoiding that which needs attention. Christian waiting is waiting with anticipation. That is what Mary models for us at the Annunciation. She waits with expectant hope which enables Christ to be born. As people called to ministry in the Diocese of Killaloe we are not called to "aimless waiting" in the chance that something might happen. We are called to *expectant* waiting, so that something new will be born, that something new will be embodied, that something new will be incarnated in our midst, and in our time.

In waiting expectantly we wait in a manner that make us available. We wait like the good servants at the wedding feast with our wicks trimmed, lamps lit and extra oil held in reserve. We wait ready for when God knocks on our heart to engage us in service.

In service of His Kingdom and not in the development of our own little fiefdoms which later, with a raft of terms and conditions, we will affiliate to the Kingdom of God.

The premature birthing of a vision or of a new culture is dangerous. We are good at taking off before the starter's gun has sounded. We like to feel we are doing something and that we have not relinquished autonomy or control. And what happens? We expend huge amounts of energy only to find ourselves having to come back to the starting point to begin all over again. Then we project our disappointment onto God, our fellow ministers or those to whom we are called to serve. But remember the prophets words; *"the vision will not disappoint"*. So what's all the disappointment about? Might it be more about the death of our plans and the slow lingering death of our vision? Might we be projecting onto God's vision something we need to own in relation to our ministerial plans and dreams?

In ministry, misplaced grief is dangerous as we never truly mourn that which has actually died. This is the very dynamic that prevents the sprouting of new shoots. We must let go before we can take hold of something new. This is something which Pope Francis is continually inviting us to engage and to encounter in the life of the Church, in the life of discipleship, and in the life of faith. This is something we have only tentatively begun to explore as a Diocese.

As ministers we can very quickly slip into a world view of seeing ourselves as the ones called to fix, to make good and to restore. We find ourselves in a cycle of writing plans and schedules often for the sake of writing plans and schedules. If nothing else it helps to maintain our "messiah" complex. And while we are disciples called to walk with one another, we very quickly can adopt the role of leader and expert. How quickly we become instructive as Church; something Synodality is challenging in a radical way. Such a view of ministry only breeds co-dependency while Synodality encourages cooperation, involvement and empowerment. "They need me" we tell ourselves, but deep down the major dynamic is that as ministers, we need to be needed. We find our ministerial identity in what we do, not in who we are as beloved disciples of Jesus Christ. It is probably one of the major dynamics affecting ordained and lay ministry. In our post Covid world – who needs us or who wants us? This has become a core question for so many involved in ministry. And yet, it is not meant to be about me.

Remember, the Church has never, and should never, exist for itself. We are called to *mission*. We are called to reach out beyond ourselves. We are called to evangelise. We are called to the "lost sheep", the "lost coin", the "prodigal" son or daughter. A self-

## THE FURROW

referential church is not the Church as envisioned by Jesus. As Pope Francis reminded us at one of his audiences when he said *"I would say that it is right to be concerned, but above all to be mindful if one perceives a worldly church, that is, one that follows the criteria of success of the world and forgets that it does not exist to proclaim itself, but rather Jesus"*.

### IT IS THE FAITH COMMUNITY THAT SUSTAINS AND ORDERS MINISTRY

Remember we are called first to be disciples. In the Gospels the disciples never went out alone. Jesus always sent them in pairs. While convenient, the ministry of the lone ranger has no place in the Gospel. And yet, within our current diocesan structures, we run the risk of not just creating, but facilitating a system with nothing but lone rangers. The prospect of increasing numbers of ministers being asked to stand alone at solitary *Look Out Posts*, raises an immediate need for us as a Diocese to review our structures.

I can still remember a sociology lecture given by Fr Liam Ryan in Maynooth University when he said *"a spoon of strawberry jam is lovely on a slice of toast. But spread that same spoon of jam over ten slices of toast and you may as well have no jam at all"*.

There is a correlation between the *quality* of ministry and the sense of *community* within which we minister. One flows out of the other. This is what prevents celibates becoming bachelors; it prevents lay and ordained ministers running on parallel tracks; it prevents lay ministers from overinvesting in the work of ministry and neglecting their primary relationship with family; it prevents our ministerial endeavours evading the core needs of the faith communities we are called to serve. There is a corrective found for ministry which is engaged within the context of community. When we neglect the community aspect or locus of ministry, this in itself is telling us that there is something out of kilter in our model of ministry. Ministry outside a community, or a collaborative framework lacks the counterbalance we all need. Ministry within the context of healthy Christian community affords structure, maintains boundaries and establishes a contract.

This is at the heart of Holy Week when we hear Jesus say – *"not my will but yours be done"*. Obedience is always found at the heart of authentic ministry. To live our lives through the lens of what God is asking of us in the context of this faith community at this particular time is the primary vocation of those engaged in ministry. Remember we are called to be faithful not successful. Such a barometer puts a radically different hermeneutic on how we assess ministry and our ministerial endeavours.

## WHEN THE BURDEN BECOMES TOO HEAVY TO BEAR

I am not sure if any of you have come across the Jesuit Priest, Greg Boyle. He is based in Los Angeles where he ministers to ex-gang members and their families. He once said: *"It would seem that, quite possibly, the ultimate measure of health in any community might well reside in our ability to stand in awe at what folks have to carry rather than in judgment at how they carry it"*.

This give us reason to remember this evening our fellow ministers and those to whom we minister who have struggled, or those who have left ministry or who have left the Church. Those who have fallen like Jesus under the weight of the cross they had to carry. I continually ask myself on what side of that equation as presented by Fr. Greg Bolye do I find myself on. As ministers we are called to be of service to those who struggle. We are called to help people carry their load, not to stand in judgement as to how they carry it. This is more easily done for the people to whom we minister to, rather than to those we minister with; our co-workers in the vineyard. Holy Week reminds us that we are called to be Simons of Cyrene not the Solders who stood in judgement and cast lots for the spoils. We are called to help lift the crosses that others have to carry. We are not called to hit those who fall when they are down. Genuine care is enabled when, in awe filled wonder, we acknowledge what people have to carry rather than standing in judgement as to how they carry it. It is about humbly admitting, that there but for the grace of God goes any of us.

The gateway to love is empathy for it enables us to exercise authentic service. Empathy is both the pathway and the key that leads us from judgement to mercy. Empathy moves us from walking away, to standing by people. It moves us from shame to acceptance. From self-preservation as ministers and as a Church, to spending ourselves in solidarity with those who have fallen or those who are falling by the wayside.

As ministers and leaders we are always disciples. It was the mantra of John the Baptist and it must become our mantra too – "we become less so that Jesus can become greater". We become less so that others can rediscover their true dignity as children of God. It's about replacing our opinions, our views, our judgements and our prejudices, with a Christ inspired empathy and love. It is the mantra of Holy Thursday and the reoccurring mantra of the Mass. "Do this in memory of me". If we are exercising healthy ministry this will be our greatest, and probably our only worthwhile legacy. That we did it in memory of Jesus. When the programmes and the plans have long faded into distant memory what will still remain? I am reminded of what Sr. Bosco a Career Guidance Teacher and

## THE FURROW

member of the Pastoral Care Team in St. Joseph's Secondary School Tulla, constantly reminded me as a young priest when she quoted Maya Angelou: *"People may not remember what we did or said, but they will remember how we made them feel"*.

### ALLOWING JESUS MINISTER TO US BEFORE WE MINISTER TO OTHERS

We have gathered this evening as fellow ministers for a meal on the eve of Holy Thursday, the day on which we commemorate that most special meal, the Last Supper. Meals and the sharing of food at table, have the ability to break down barriers, create bounds and build connections. It is no wonder that Jesus spent so much of his ministry at dinner tables. That he chose to commission his disciples for ministry at a meal.

Here again, Jesus picks the venue of the Upper Room. Jesus is the one washing feet. Jesus is the one who breaks the bread and pours the wine. It is clear that he is ministering to his disciples before he commissions them to minister to others. He is also modelling ministry for them. Like the early disciples, before we ever contemplate ministering to others, we must first have allowed Jesus to minister to us. If you have had the humbling experience of having your feet washed by another when you least deserved it, you will engage the washing of another's feet in a radically different way. And the same is true of all ministries.

Before we contemplate ministry, we must have allowed Jesus to minister and feed us first. After any length of time at the coal face of ministry, we realise that we cannot do this work for very long if we are drawing solely from our own resources. We need prayer and we need a relationship with Christ, if we are ever going to find the wherewithal to leave our modern day upper rooms.

Like the early disciples we too can lock ourselves into the fear filled 'Upper Rooms' of our times. How we lock the doors of our heart for fear we might get hurt; we lock the doors of our eyes for fear we might see something that will change us; we lock the doors of our mind for fear our minds might be changed by learning something new; we lock the doors on new possibilities for fear of the unknown, we lock the doors into new ways of being Church for fear we might end up losing the little we have managed to salvage and hold onto. We will only hear the words that gave the disciples courage to unlock the door of that first Upper Room and venture out, if like them, we are in conversation with Christ in prayer. It is in prayer that we grow to believe those Easter words "Do not be afraid", "Do not be afraid I am with you always yes till the end of time".

## MINISTERS AND MINISTRY

### BEING NOURISHED IN PRAYER BEFORE WE ATTEMPT TO FEED THE HUNGRY

Remember, all the tensions we witness around this Last Supper table emanated from the disciples own insecurity. It is Christ who maintains unity. And what happens when Christ is not present? As he foretold before his death, the flock was struck and the flock scattered. Prayer is the glue that holds us together as Church and as fellow ministers in the Diocese of Killaloe. Prayer is what feeds us. If we haven't allowed ourselves to be fed by Christ we will end up feeding on "fast food". In our ministry we will only have 'junk food' to offer to those who come hungering for so much more. As ministers we are called to offer nourishment to the *People of God*. We are called to nourish them with Christ and not mere paltry offerings from the larder of our own resources. If we as ministers in the Diocese of Killaloe never pray and break bread together, we will never realise the full potential or the new synergies that could arise from the new ministerial initiatives we are embarking on as a Diocese this evening.

### BEFRIENDING THOSE JESUS BEFRIENDED

In his ministry Jesus was often criticised for whom he eat and kept company with. People also criticised Jesus for the amount he eat and drank. And yet, it would seem that Jesus would rather have offended the people who had plenty of everything, those who had so much that they had become full of themselves, so as to feed and build up the vulnerable and those on the margins. Ministry is about living and working with those on the margins, those who truly hunger and thirst. Christian ministry is about growing in our ability to live in solidarity with those in our Church and in our society that have nobody to stand by, for, or with them.

If we befriend Jesus we will end up befriend the people he kept company with in the Gospel; thieves, tax collectors and prostitutes to name just a few. Healthy ministry naturally draws us into mission, a mission in which we risk being contaminated by the stranger's isolation. We take this risk in an effort to give people a sense of belonging. As a Church we are called to follow the example of Jesus and to befriend those that others may deem "unsavoury". Those currently on the margins of church and society. This might result in us losing the "respectable" people we currently have. In the Gospels Jesus seems to continually remind us that it is people and their stories that make a meal truly nourishing and memorable. In Jesus' world view it is never the guest list or the menu that is influencer of where, or with whom, he sits at table



## THE FURROW

with. As ministers we may find ourselves exchanging our ticket to the banquet's main table because we have found that real life, fulfilment and nourishment is to be had on the margins. That place where life is real and the needs are great. It is about living an *incarnate* style of ministry.

## EMPOWERING DISCIPLES TO A MINISTRY OF LEADERSHIP

Ministry is demanding. In fact the work of ministry could occupy us fully. But as commissioned ministers for the Diocese of Killaloe we are called to something more than just work or a job. Yes we are called to work in the vineyard but we are also called to find, train and enable the next generation of ministers. This is the mission entrusted to us by Jesus in his grand commissioning when he said "Go make disciples of all nations". As commissioned ministers for the Diocese of Killaloe we are disciples forming disciples. We are not merely engaged in charitable work. By our ministry and the lives we live, we are called to bear witness. Our witness is meant to inspire others to become disciples and so volunteer themselves to also come and work in the vineyard. If at the end of our ministry we find we are holding the baton, then something is amiss. If Jesus, the actual Messiah, has given us a model of ministry in which He empowered His disciples to a ministry of leadership, anything less is not following in His example. Ministry is not an occupation or a pastime. Nor is it something we choose to do with our surplus time or our surplus resources. It is a way of life. We are called and commissioned in the hope that we will enable others to hear that call and engage in what St. Paul has called running the great race right to the end.

## CONCLUSION

Remember what the prophet Habakkuk wrote: "*The vision still has its time, presses onto fulfilment and it will not disappoint ... and if it delays, wait for it [2:3]*". As ministers in the Diocese of Killaloe may we grow sensitive to God's vision and dream for us. May we minister in a manner whereby we display our belief that God's vision has its time and that it does not disappoint. May we wait with anticipation to hear the whisper of God's invitation in our own hearts before we go about extending invitations to others. And if we are disappointed, or disheartened, may we like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, feel our own hearts "burn within us" as Jesus talks to us on the road. Even if he does present in the guise of a stranger and we walking in the wrong direction!