Firstly thank you so much to Monsignor Hugh and the College for having me here to speak tonight. I can honestly say I never thought in a million years that I would be doing this, and perhaps you never thought you’d be listening to a female Bishop at this historic establishment either! But it is good to be here and I feel it a privilege to be asked to address you. I am going to do something very simple – I am going to share a little of my own journey and talk specifically about my favourite verses of the Bible, and hopefully the two will tie in somewhere down the line! The Bible is a weighty tome, and I know when I was studying Theology I almost lost the ability to view the Bible as the living Word that spoke to me on a daily basis – you can get so used to approaching it academically that it can feel like work. I developed the habit of different Bibles – one for work, one for my own walk with the Lord. That seemed to work for me even though it is of course an artificial division – our work lives are intermingled with the rest of us and are not separate from us! Yet the study of the Scriptures can lead us to lose the vitality of God’s living, present word to us and for us for that particular day. It is an occupational hazard!

The sales manager of a dog food company asked his sales team how they liked the company’s new advertising campaign. ‘Great, the best in the business’ they replied. ‘How do you like our new label and the packaging?’ ‘Great, the best in the business’ they replied. ‘How do you like our sales force?’ They were the sales force so they had to admit they were good. ‘Ok then’ said the manager, ‘we have the best label, the best packaging, the best advertising slogan being sold by
the best sales team in the business. Tell me, why are we 17th place in the dog food business? There was silence...finally someone said, ‘it’s those lousy dogs. They won’t eat the stuff!’

Whilst we laugh at this, do you ever feel that sometimes we spend a lot of time, and sometimes money in the church, making sure our brand and our sales team is right, and then we blame the consumer when they just don’t want our product? All the advertising in the world wouldn’t make dogs eat the grub if it just doesn’t taste good. But we know that isn’t true of us – ‘O taste and see that the Lord is good’ the psalmist says. We know that once tasted, Jesus is never forgotten. Yet when people in a more and more secular Irish society don’t want to know, we blame them. The consumer doesn’t want the product. But actually all too often, it is we who aren’t the best salespeople that we could be, because it is our lives that are the actual advert. It always makes me think that everything about the Christian life and its witness goes back to personal faith. Without being facetious, if we love the product, and love it so much that we just can’t stop talking about it, then I am convinced that the consumer, or people, will still want to ask us about the joy that is within us. Joy is infectious.

For me, it’s all about personal faith – even the position that I now find myself in as Bishop of Meath and Kildare, and the first female Bishop in the UK and Ireland. It would all be for nothing if it weren’t for my absolute grip on the love that I have for Jesus Christ, but so much more than that, on the love that He has for me. I wasn’t brought up in church circles and people are often surprised by that. They assume when they see the collar that religion has been instilled in you from an early age. I knew virtually nothing about the gospel until I was at university at Trinity and living with some committed Christians who had a story
and a joy that I knew nothing about. I was a happy, contented person when I was
19, so it wasn’t a commitment of faith out of great happiness or even need. I just
started to read the gospels, fell in love with the personality of Jesus, and decided
that it was true – and if it was true, then it deserved my life’s work. The
trajectory of my life changed at that point. I had spent years wanting to be an air
hostess – which was pretty futile considering I actually hate flying – but from
that moment on I felt a call to some form of Christian leadership. Of course it
took years to work out in my life – I married and had children and anyway
women weren’t being accepted for Ordination until 1990. I pushed the door of
Ordination (sometimes a very silly thing to do if you’re not ready for the
answer!), got accepted for training and was ordained in 1997. I was a curate in
Ballymena, worked with my husband in Glenavy, and then in 2004 went to Derry
to be a Rector where I was until the House of Bishops scared me rigid by
appointing me as Bishop here in Meath and Kildare! It was not a post I ever
anticipated or sought. I love Parish ministry and I thought that was my niche. So
my appointment – which I can assure you was just as much a surprise for the
rest of the Church of Ireland as it was to me – has taken some adjusting to by
myself and my family.

But so far, I am loving it! It is completely different from parish ministry
and I am on a very steep learning curve, but it is fun. The position opens doors
that you never thought you would be going through – not to name drop but last
week when I was initially supposed to be here with you, I was at Buckingham
Palace meeting the Queen (and I have to admit, much more exciting, meeting
Niall Horan of One Direction!)! So thank you Monsignor Hugh for releasing me
for such an occasion! And it was an occasion – very few bows and courtesies
from the Irish, but a phenomenal piece of history to be a part of. That’s what I mean by doors opening – I wouldn’t be here without my appointment. And I have a long list of invitations to speak at events that due to my new role.

But I am careful not to get carried away – you shouldn’t believe your own publicity, and the language surrounding my new role often disturbs me – words are used like promotion; elevation; your Grace, my Lord – and whilst people are simply trying to give you due respect, it does seem to me a long way from Jesus’ instructions to his disciples that first and foremost, they are to be servants. I feel that servanthood and leadership are not in fact mutually exclusive, but feed off one another, and I certainly need to keep my feet on the ground and believe me I have people in my life who will help me do just that!

But perhaps on to what I want to focus on which I mentioned at the beginning – my favourite verses of Scripture and they are at the end of John chapter 6. To put the verses in context, Jesus has started to say what he means and mean what he says. He has stopped speaking in parables and leaving people to work out what he means. In John ch 6 he is saying straight out ‘I am the bread of life’ and people are really not taking kindly to it. Some of them tackle him head on and ask him what on earth he means, and others at this point just walk away. V 66 says ‘because this teaching was so difficult, many of Jesus’ disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.’ And here we come to my favourite two verses in the whole Bible: v67-69:

‘So Jesus asked the Twelve: ‘do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him: ‘Lord to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’
To me these are awesome words, and it is so significant that Jesus tests them to see if they too want out – but I especially love that short verse ‘Lord, to whom can we go?’ Have you ever felt that in your moments of difficulty or pain, sadness or disappointment. ‘Lord, to whom can we go?’ There is no-one else. That is the rock upon which we stand – Lord, to whom can we go? Christians believe there is no-one else. This is the one. This is the only product we’re selling. Jesus is the One.

So whether I was looking after children full time in the home (which incidentally was much harder than this job!), or working with WeightWatchers which I did for a while, whilst simultaneously working in Leonidas, a Belgian chocolate shop (now there’s a conflict of interest!), or finally feeling the call of God on my life to get ordained, right through to where I am now, even if it is a surprise and an adjustment – the foundation of my life remains exactly the same since that moment on my own kneeling by the bed at 19 years of age: ‘Lord, to whom can I go? For you have the words of eternal life. I have come to know and believe that you are the Holy One of God.’

That is the product that we sell, to use crass business jargon. When we have joy in Him – despite our circumstances or our normal human ups and downs (which Christians are not exempt from) – if we can retain our joy and hope in Him as the rock on which we stand – ‘the rock that is higher than I’ – then we will be like a magnet. We won’t need slogans, and strategies, and sales pitches. Our joy will be laid out for all to see. And that will be enough. Personal faith is enough. He is enough.

‘So Jesus asked the Twelve: ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘Lord, to whom can we go?’