

ARMAGH DIOCESAN SYNOD – ARCHBISHOP’S ADDRESS

Saturday 03 November 2018

As always, I would like to begin by thanking many people who make this Diocese of Armagh a hard-working and valuable element within the life of a wider Church of Ireland. And, as always, I do this not as a duty, but because I am truly grateful to all those who make life as an archbishop of this diocese a great deal less nerve-wracking and (who knows) perhaps even more useful than it could ever otherwise hope to be.

First of all, I wish to thank those with whom I work on a very regular basis in their leadership roles within the diocese - our two archdeacons, the Dean of Armagh, our honorary secretaries of Council, and our rural deans. Also, I would like to thank my executive chaplain, Canon Shane Forster, and the staff of Church House – Mrs Jane Leighton, Mrs Jennifer Kirkland, and my PA, Mrs Pamela Hutton. In this expression of thanks, I include also Mr David Brown who is making a considerable mark in the youth and children’s ministry with which he has been entrusted, and Mr Jonathan Hull for all that he does for the communications aspects of Armagh Diocese. There are many others who serve on the committees and boards of the diocese, and I include those who give sacrificially of their time in secretarial or other administrative capacities.

Clearly we should express sincere gratitude to the clergy and all who maintain both worship and pastoral care in our parishes, including in this our diocesan readers, parish readers and pastoral visitors. But also there are the many, many people who serve in different and often unsung ways in the parishes of our diocese, without whom the life of the Church would be immeasurably weakened.

Over the past years, we have welcomed Revd Mark Lennox to Killyman Parish and Revd Diane Matchett to Kildress & Altedesert. Revd Graham Hare and Revd Geoffrey Walmsley were ordained to the priesthood in a beautiful service in the Cathedral on 14 September, and Graham Hare has moved from his intern diaconate in St Mark’s Armagh to the curacy of Drumglass.

More recently I have appointed Revd Dr Peter Thompson to a canonry in the Cathedral and Revd Elizabeth Cairns has accepted the position of Rural Dean of Mullabrack. We wish all of them God’s blessing in the responsibilities they have taken on in his service.

Sadly we have also said farewell to a number of clergy who have moved from the diocese to appointments in other places - Revd Johnny McLoughlin from the Clonfeacle Group, Revd Andy Heber from the Clogherny Group and Revd Dr Chris Broddle from the Errigal Keerogue Group. We thank all of them for their contribution to the life of these parishes and to the wider diocese.

We also wish Revd William Anderson and Revd Canon Neville Hughes (and their families) every happiness in their well-deserved retirements and again, express sincere gratitude for the ministries that

they exercised so effectively in Tullanisken & Clonoe, and Mullabrack & Kilcluney respectively and, of course, in the diocese as a whole.

Next year, 2019, marks one hundred and fifty years since the Church of Ireland was disestablished - becoming an independent Province within what was then very much a fledgling Anglican Communion, no longer part of the Church of England or an integral part of the operation of the state, legally the "national Church". It was a traumatic time for the Church as it sought to come to terms with what it meant to have to stand on its own feet and map out its own future in every respect. Much has changed for the Church of Ireland in the past 150 years and even in the past 50 years since that time, which some of us can still remember, when the Church celebrated the mere centenary of its disestablishment. But even though next year's celebration will be in part about history and change (and as a student of history I welcome that), it will also be an opportunity to ask ourselves what we wish to become, where we need to set our face, and if we can indeed face the future with the same courage that was shown by our predecessors in 1869. Perhaps we need to use the opportunity to have a reality check - a health check - to see what the years and decades have made of us as a Church, and what we need to do in order to have a healthy future, rather than simply to "stagger on" for a few more years. And it is with this in mind that I would like, for a few minutes, to look at different aspects of health and wholeness.

First of all, as a Church and as a diocese: There seems little doubt that we might indeed manage to "hang on" as a community for another generation or two, even as the world around us changes radically, and ignores us ever more disdainfully in the rising tide of secularisation and self-absorption. Yes, we have reasonable human and financial resources. But is that all there is to our ambitions for the Kingdom of God - survival as an institution for the time being?

It was Our Lord who said that whoever seeks only to save his or her life will assuredly lose it. Part of the continuing good health of any Christian community is the degree to which it looks outside itself and its own continued existence. We will be thinking further on this later in the synod, in our afternoon "slot" outside Standing Orders, but in the meantime it is worth reflecting that real health is not achieved when we simply wrap ourselves up and refuse to take any steps outside familiar and unruffled surroundings. In my previous diocese, the See House in which I lived for many years was on the edge of a large stud farm. When we first moved into the house, I remember saying to one of the staff on the stud how surprised I was to see these immensely valuable race horses, some worth hundreds of thousands of euro and even millions of euro, cantering out in the fields around the house even in bad weather, in the rain and the cold. I assumed that they would be kept molly-coddled in warm and luxurious stables, 24/7. To which I was given the rather scathing response, "And how many races do you think they would win, if they weren't used to being outside in the cold and damp?" We too have to take risks and face the uncomfortable if we are to be of any use in the real and exacting world outside our own comfort zones.

Many parish communities do indeed look beyond their boundaries to the needs of a wider world. I was reminded of this earlier this year when on a visit under the auspices of CMSI to Zambia. I realised just how *connected* disciples are and can be with one another in a global network of Christians. But unless we as Christian disciples are known for our willingness to move beyond the known and the comfortable we cannot pretend that we are healthy and complete. It may be often more difficult to move into the new and unexpected in our own context than in more distant environments. But Christ expects nothing less of us.

But we need to look at health from a wider perspective also. The health of our country and of our society. We are living in dangerous times, whether or not we choose to admit it. When there is a political vacuum terrible things can happen. When things are allowed to drift politically, any country faces serious danger. History would teach us that. Sadly, too many people regard history only as something they can mine to justify their own prejudices, instead of a study that might help us to anticipate dangers and face challenges with perception. When a stable society begins to collapse and when democratic norms no longer seem to work, other saviours will emerge but they are not the ones we need.

Next week we will commemorate the centenary of the Armistice, the end of the First World War. Then next September it will be eighty years since the start of the Second World War. We must learn from those costly lessons of the past... "lest we forget". Whatever our views may be on Brexit, we need to be more than aware that this is dividing communities and even families and perhaps even society itself. And, if stable political and social systems are threatened, what emerges may be more monstrous than anything we could have conceived. And to stay silent or uncaring in such a situation will be to connive at such an outcome. Our bible study from the Book of Esther reminded us that we have to accept responsibility for what goes on around us. We cannot assume that it is always "someone else's business". Half a century ago, Martin Luther King spoke to every generation when he said that we will have to repent not only for the words and acts of the children of darkness but also for the fears and apathy of the children of light. It will be our children and our grandchildren who may pay the price of our indifference or cowardice.

And it will be our children and grandchildren who will pay a terrible price if we do not act as responsible guardians of the health of the earth on which we have been placed. A couple of weeks ago, I was taking part in the international dialogue between the Anglican and Orthodox traditions that I co-chair. One of the areas we were discussing was that of the environment and one of the points that emerged from our discussion was the certainty that humankind has lost the sense of gratitude for creation and also any awareness that the world in which we live should fill us constantly with wonder and with reverence for God. Instead we see the world as existing only for our use and our selfishness. But this cannot last. We are nearing the point where the wasteful pollution and unnecessary heating of this planet is about to

find a tipping point from which there can be no return. We have been placed on this earth by God to protect its health and wholeness. We are the guardians of its health, not the despoilers of its beauty and goodness but our complacency and disregard is also now affecting our own health. Just last week it was confirmed for the first time by scientists that human bodies are becoming polluted with plastic. We have heard much in the last year about the tide of plastic in the world's seas and oceans and until now most research has focussed on the natural world, but new studies now show that we, humans, are also consuming plastic through our water and the eating of fish and tiny pieces of plastic are lodging in our bodies. The long term health implications at this stage are simply unknown. Our failure to appreciate fully the natural world, and our unwillingness to accept that there have been many times when we have treated the world as ours by right rather than entrusted to us as a gift, will have ramifications for us and for our children and children's children.

I have spoken about "health" in what are principally *metaphorical* terms, but I want to mention one final aspect of health and this is far from metaphorical. It is the immense upsurge, particularly among young people (although it is far from being an issue only for young people) in problems of mental health. In a recent survey in Northern Ireland, over 40% of 16-25 year olds said that they had experienced a mental health problem, and nearly 70% that they "always or often" feel stressed. One in 5 in a younger age-group - 11-15 year olds - in the Republic of Ireland experience clear symptoms of anxiety or constant nervousness, according to the latest report issued by UNICEF Ireland. Very sadly and very worryingly, suicide rates in Northern Ireland have soared in recent years at a much faster rate than in the rest of the UK. According to a report by the Samaritans, overall suicide rates in the UK as a whole have increased by 3.8 per cent since 2014. However, the number of deaths attributed to suicide in Northern Ireland has increased by 18.5 per cent during the same period, according to the findings. Taking the figures year on year, this means that more people have died through suicide in Northern Ireland since the signing of the Belfast Agreement than died from violence during the Troubles. Despite this terrible reality there is not enough funding available to address suicide and mental health problems in a proactive and beneficial way within the Province.

What we must never do is dismiss any of these statistics as mere hype. It is something of the utmost seriousness. I was grateful that our youth and children's ministry group provided a course in the past few weeks for some of those involved with ministry among young people, but this will surely require wider take-up in the diocese as a whole. In recent years many parishioners have also taken part in suicide awareness training. We need to be alert to the needs of our young people but, equally, not to simplify the possible causes of mental health problems or to imagine that any of us has the expertise to deal with any and every situation. There are times when we must be ready to accept our own limitations. We also need to accept that mental ill-health is not an issue only for the young. Many older people, suffer isolation or depression and do not have the confidence to look for help from others. To be alert to the suffering of others without being intrusive or overbearing is a difficult balance to bring to our relationships.

As Christian disciples, we are called to be agents of healing. Part of Our Lord's commission to his first disciples was that they should be his healers in the world. We tend to narrow this down to healing miracles of a visible and physical kind, but to bring healing to a world outside our petty churchy concerns, healing to a society that is broken, healing to this fragile but beautiful earth (a responsibility with which we have been entrusted by God), and healing to those who are alone, afraid and hurt is part of the work which Jesus Christ is handing to us today.

In the beautiful but humbling words, attributed to Teresa of Avila from the 16th Century:

Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

This is our calling as individuals; this is our call as the Church.