

THE ARCHBISHOP OF ARMAGH'S PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS AT THE ARMAGH DIOCESAN SYNOD 2017

The Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, The Most Revd Dr Richard Clarke, delivered his Presidential Synod Address on Saturday morning at the 2017 Armagh Diocesan Synod in the Alexander Synod Hall, Church House, Armagh. He spoke on four themes – hospitality, sincerity, engagement and enchantment – relating to how the Church reaches out to its neighbours.

Archbishop Richard said: 'In a world where people feel increasingly alone and bereft of dignity and worth, it should surely be within a Church community that they can find that they do matter, in the eyes of God's people, and so they may come to understand that they matter, infinitely, to God.' He referred to the response of local churches and other faith communities to the Grenfell Tower fire in London, and the command to be 'engaged with the world around us ... fully and even sacrificially'.

Archbishop Richard concluded by speaking on the 'immensely deep need in people ... to be captivated by something beyond themselves' which can ultimately be met by 'the magnetic love of Christ calling people out of themselves, their misery and fear and anger, towards his love.'

Extracts from the address below:

2017 ARMAGH DIOCESAN PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS EXTRACTS

Last year at this synod, I spoke of the Anglican Communion's understanding of "Five Marks of Mission" as fundamental to what we are, and what we hope to be. These *five marks* are – (1) to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom, (2) to teach, baptise and nurture new believers, (3) to respond to human need by loving service, (4) to transform unjust structures of society and to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation, and (5) to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth. I asked that every parish would regard the five marks as being in some way a *yardstick* to its own life and witness. In other words, I suggested that every activity we undertake as Christian communities should be measured against these marks of mission and, if they have absolutely nothing to do with them or, more seriously, if any parish activities are even taking us in an opposite direction to the five marks of mission, then we must certainly question why we are doing them. This year I continue with that challenge to you, and I want now to develop this thinking in a slightly different mode.

We know that we live in a world that may be a "developed world" in one sense but is now one which is bewildered, frightened and angry, a world in which many people feel more isolated and alienated than has been the case for generations. The opportunities for reaching out to those many people around us who are disillusioned with life, lonely and *hurting* are plainly there, staring us in the face. What do we need to show, as Christian communities, to such children of God that may make them seek God's face *again* (or even, perhaps, for the first time)? Briefly, I am going to suggest four words that I would like you to take back with you to your own parishes, and seek to relate them to those marks of mission of which I have spoken.

The first is the deeply biblical principle of **hospitality**. How "at home" would an individual or family feel if they entered, stranger or newcomer – perhaps nervously and tentatively – into one of our parishes? Would they feel that they were an object of suspicion or comment, or might they feel that they were being welcomed just as they were? The great French essayist, Michel de Montaigne, wrote that real hospitality accepts people as they are. The bad host makes people feel uncomfortable or makes them accept that they must adhere to certain expectations or particular rules before they are truly welcome. We have no right to consider whether people will "fit in" or whether they will be any use to us before we decide whether or not we really want them. This is not only unworthy, it is sacrilege. Christ did not go to the cross simply for "people like us" or people we regard as worthy of our friendship and care.

In a world where people feel increasingly alone and bereft of dignity and worth, it should surely be within a Church community that they can find that they do matter, in the eyes of God's people, and so they may come to understand that they matter, *infinitely*, to God. Hospitality is more than perfunctory welcome – it means bringing people into our hearts, and not simply exchanging polite platitudes with them at the back of the church, utterly indifferent as to whether we ever see them again or not.

The second word is **sincerity**. I am very conscious that it is a word that has become rather jaded. Indeed if we hear of someone that they are “very sincere”, our reaction is probably to run a mile as it seems inevitable that he or she will be rather heavy-going! So we must redeem this word ‘sincerity’. The origin of the word is commonly believed to come originally from a Latin construct, *sine cera*, which means “without wax”. In classical times wax was sometimes used to disguise defects in objects such as statues or pottery, and to guarantee something as being “without wax” meant that there was no cover-up, no pretence. We should not have pretensions about ourselves, either as individuals or as communities. We are all deeply flawed, and we are all in need of correction and forgiveness. It has been said that Christian witness is one beggar in the gutter telling another beggar where food might be found. That is what we are. When we pretend to ourselves or to others that we are somehow in a more elevated place than they are, and that such people should be happy to be drawn up to our level – morally, spiritually or any other way – we are extremely waxy, like a melted and twisted candle, totally *cum cera* rather than *sine cera*. The witticism (usually attributed to George Burns), “If you can fake sincerity, you’ve got it made”, has a horrible truth at the heart of it. People, however, are not fools. They are very quickly drawn far more to genuineness, to integrity, and to self-awareness than to pretentiousness and self-deception. If we can only offer image and self-love, we have nothing of any value to give to those around us.

A third word is **engagement**. The word has a number of nuances, but here I mean – in effect – the opposite of *disengagement*. You and I are called to be committed to and involved in the life, the needs and the cares of the world around us. It is very easy for Christians to separate their religion from the everyday life of the world; it is also supremely dangerous. In what we know as the “high-priestly prayer”, that prayer of Our Lord in John's Gospel, chapter 17, his prayer is that his followers will be fully in the world, in the darkness of the world as well as its joys. If we as disciples live only in a ghetto of our own making, we are actively shutting people out of the Church, and so we are shutting out Jesus Christ himself.

On the night of the terrible fire in the Grenfell Tower in London in June, the first people on the scene to bring help and comfort (other than the fire and police services) were men and women of local faith communities. I learnt more recently that there is a computerised system that ensures that when more than six fire appliances are called to a fire, or a terrorist outrage or any other disaster, the Salvation Army will automatically be called for help. They were there first on the night of the Grenfell fire, but very quickly local faith groups of every kind were combining to give shelter, food, blankets and just straightforward comfort to those who had escaped from the tower block. More movingly, by the next morning the west London synagogue had sent a huge consignment of clothes, food and other necessities to the local mosque. The faith response to Grenfell is, in Christian terms, not simply good neighbourliness, important though this undoubtedly is. It is the command of faith that if we are not engaged with the world around us – fully and even sacrificially – we have left Christ outside the door of our churches. How can we then expect anyone else outside our doors to take us seriously or wish to be part of us?

The fourth and final word may be the most unexpected, **enchantment**. We may associate enchantment with the world of Harry Potter or the novels of Philip Pullman, but that should perhaps teach us something. Even those, such as Pullman, who are deeply antagonistic to religious faith of any kind, realise that an immensely deep need in people is to be captivated by something beyond themselves. Enchantment comes from the idea of the entrancing song that can carry people to another place of wonder, a place beyond themselves. This is not about stunts or artificial trickery but about the magnetic love of Christ calling people out of themselves, their misery and fear and anger, towards his love. The Scottish poet, Edwin Muir, in telling phrases about the religion of his childhood speaks of how there the “Word made flesh” was reduced to words, and how God became “three angry letters in

a book". Religion was presented to Muir as a youth as a vehicle of bare words and stark logic. As he puts it,

*the logical hook
On which the Mystery is impaled and bent
Into an ideological argument.*

There is an inherent and unmistakable beauty in true faith – the beauty of holiness. If men, women and children in the grip of pain, fear and loneliness are to be helped on their journey into the Kingdom of God, it will not be by clever argument or strident threats. It will be when they come upon that beauty of Christ the good shepherd, that magnetic enchantment of faith, in the life of the Church wherever they may encounter it.

Hospitality, sincerity, engagement and enchantment – let each of them be what people can see in us as the Body of Christ in this diocese of Armagh.

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