

A sermon preached at a Service to mark the one hundredth anniversary of the Royal Ulster Constabulary GC in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, on the Sunday after the Ascension Day, 29 May 2022.

If I could first thank the organisers of this event for their kind invitation to preach at this important service. It is an honour to have been asked, but it is also quite a responsibility. Anniversaries are not necessarily straightforward. Not many people, never mind many individuals or organisations, look back over one hundred years without moments of regret and, of course, of pain as well as of celebration.

And one of the things which I think it is helpful to keep in mind on occasions like this, is that we are remembering and celebrating the lives and the sacrifice and the service of *individuals* and not of a corporate body or a faceless organization. Individual people who put on that distinctive uniform, but were still themselves underneath it all, and brought all that they were to the task.

But to take that thought a step further, the vocation of law enforcement and community service is more than just a job. Individual officers down the years brought all that they were to their vocation, but that vocation also shaped them more than most ways of simply "earning a living".

That particular aspect of their vocation probably wasn't unique to the RUC: I imagine there is a bond between police officers in many countries and the presence of some of your colleagues from An Garda Siochana in the congregation today is very eloquent testimony to that.

But again there was something unique about the RUC and I imagine that many of you think back to the years of the Troubles and say "How on earth did we live and work through that"? We live in a completely different world now compared to the days of the Troubles and many officers who served at that time would hardly recognise the work of a modern police officer not to mention the technology available to help carry out his or her duties.

However, the other side of that statement is that many people under the age of about thirty can hardly imagine what it was like to live through that much of the period we are remembering today.

The constantly varied routes to work for fear of being targeted. The even more nerve-racking routines that were difficult to vary, especially in part-time service, which exposed officers to murderous risks.

A couple of years ago I happened to read a book by a man who became a county inspector in the early days of the RUC after transferring from the RIC. At the same time, I was also reading another memoir by a very well known Irish novelist whose father had served in the Garda in County Leitrim at roughly the same time.

In the memoir of the Garda sergeant his son records that most days were filled with the barrack orderly sitting at the window (or outside if the weather was fine) watching who crossed the little bridge into the village of Cootehall. The other policemen stationed with him cycled the roads on what they called “patrols of the imagination” because nothing ever happened.

By contrast the memoir of the RIC Head Constable (whilst also having its lighter moments) is full of risky encounters and narrow escapes during the Anglo-Irish War, followed by seemingly relentless waves of terrorist activity, beginning at Partition and, in this case, ending with the Border Campaign of the 1950s when he retired.

I will return in a minute to say something about service during the Troubles, but I think it is also worth emphasising the fact that every aspect of every day of the past one hundred years was not filled with fear and gloom. As with all workplaces there was much friendship and fulfilment, not least in the sense of the many tens of thousands of people who the RUC was able to serve in small ways and large.

And, of course, there was humour. My father was a conductor on the trolley buses here in Belfast just after the Second World War. In those days it wasn't unusual to see cattle dealers and farmers driving cattle through the streets of Belfast down to the Docks or to Allam's Mart in Oxford Street. Occasionally there were accidents. One day an animal wandered into the path of trolley bus going up Chichester Street (pronounced Chi-chester by Belfast people) and perished in the collision.

A policeman appeared on the scene. Neither he nor the trolley bus driver had confidence that either of them would be able to spell “Chichester” in the report, so the policeman said “Is there any chance you'd give me a hand shifting it round to May Street”. I suspect that for every horror story there were ten moments like that.

But I need hardly tell you that there were many-too many- horror stories.

Policemen go “on duty” when they are working. “Duty” can sound like a rather detached and cold word. However in the English language it is derived from an old form of the French verb “devoir”. And it means “to pay what is owed”.

Thinking in those terms, the men and women who served in the RUC, and particularly those who we remember because they were murdered on duty and off duty, paid far more than anything that was ever owed to their country, to their community and to their families. They didn't go out to tramp the streets and country lanes on black dark nights because there was nothing more interesting to do.

They didn't do it for the money. They certainly didn't do it because they wanted their names to appear on a memorial tablet in a parish church, or that they should be mentioned, in passing, by an old bore in a sermon in Belfast Cathedral.

They did it to keep their families safe, and because it was their conviction that if they didn't serve, then the future was either going to be in the hands of a revolutionary junta or a rabble of gangsters and drug dealers. Both groups would have swept away much of what officers of the RUC/GC have held dear.

Although I am from this city I have spent all my ministry as a bishop and archbishop in rural dioceses, and there is hardly a parish church in the dioceses where I served that does not have a grave in the churchyard or a memorial in the church building to a member of the RUC who was murdered, some in the most horrific of circumstances. Deaths which achieved nothing except to break hearts.

And those with broken hearts – wives, husbands, children, parents, brothers and sisters - have kept faith down the years. Their love endures. They see the empty chair and miss the smile. The word of encouragement, the expression of love. Your burden is great, undiluted in time, and today we say ‘thank you’ for your quiet dignity and steadfastness and the commitment you have in honouring the memory of your loved ones.

Almost three hundred years ago a man called Thomas Gary sat in a country churchyard, this time in Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire, in England. And as he looked around him at the grave stones of the ordinary country men buried there, it dawned on him that these unsung people were the real heroes of the nation.

It is a very long poem but with some very familiar words.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
Or busy housewife ply her evening care:
Nor children run to list their sire's return,
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share...

Far from the madding crowds ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray:
Along the cool sequestered vale of life,
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Ordinary people who would rather have been calving a cow, or decorating the living room or playing with their children, who felt they had a duty to serve, not coldly but wholeheartedly, enjoying along the way the sort of comradeship that only a certain type of occupation can bring.

There was a soldier who was caught up in a conflict not entirely unlike the sort of thing that was endured here during the Troubles. His name was Thomas Lovelace and he died fighting on the side of King Charles against the Parliamentary Army in the English Civil War. Naturally his young wife was desolated and distraught when he went off to war. She couldn't understand why he had to go and put himself at such risk.

So he tried to explain his motivation in a sort of a letter/poem he wrote to her, where he said she had to remember that

*I could not love you half so well
Loved I no honour more*

And to a large degree that is what we are here to think about and to pray about today...men and women who loved honour, perhaps not more, but as well as their families and who could see through all the mists of emotion and the inclination for self-protection that lies very deep within all of us, that unless they responded to the call to protect their

homes or their families, then others who they would not want in any way to be associated with would...or perhaps no one else would.

And let us remember too today all those whose sacrifice was of a different sort and often overlooked...those who accepted without bitterness or begrudging the need for those they loved to serve in this way.

We are remembering and celebrating today in a special place and in a special way. The special place is this House of Prayer and the special way is the way of Jesus Christ, who remains us that *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called sons and daughters of God"*.

We are here today as his disciples to keep company with him, to ask for his forgiveness on all our shortcomings and to claim from him what he has offered through the mouth of his servant Isaiah:

"For I the Lord your God hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, do not fear, I will help you".

Fear comes in many forms. Many of you in this cathedral will have known it in its most sudden and visceral forms or as constant gnawing anxiety. And you might say that some form or other of anxiety has never been far from the door of this place we call home. At the very least some sort of worry about *"What next"*

So if I could finish with two thoughts. The first is that this anniversary keeps alive not just old friendships but also the memory that, for all its imperfections, there was a body of men and women whose principle motivation was to serve the community. The whole community. There were times when that was easier to do than at others. There were times when it was almost impossible as every sinew was strained to prevent a collapse into chaos. I don't think that should ever be forgotten.

And I hope too you will remember that Jesus Christ will take all the service and sacrifices that his servants made—all that was good and loving and true in their lives, and in every life—and carry those acts into the heart of his Father, together with the one, true, pure, immortal sacrifice that he made, and which has enough love in it to cover the whole world. And in the light of his sacrifice his Father will see theirs.

The faith which draws you here today is a remarkable thing because it is the gift of God. How could it be otherwise? I have said it before but it bears repeating now.

For many, faith is just the confidence of those who have never had their self-confidence shaken: the happy by-product of cheerful temperament or a sheltered existence or a limited knowledge of life's bitterness.

But so many of you here today have had your shelter taken away and have experienced just how limitless the wickedness and anguish of the world can be. You have served, and mourned and wept and prayed and loved and forborne and believed and persevered, trusting that there will be a day when justice will be vindicated.

Whatever your doubts and your questionings (and I'm sure there have been many over the years) you have looked at the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ and trusted yourselves and all who served to that love, unreservedly and forever.

And so we give thanks to God and to his Christ, for all the men and women of the RUC/GC who served conscientiously, with honour and with dignity we leave our future in the hands of God who says:

“For I the Lord your God hold your right hand; it is I who say to you, do not fear, I will help you”

And now to the King of Ages, the only wise God, be ascribed all might, majesty, dominion and power, as is most justly due. AMEN.

+John Armagh

29 May 2022

The Sunday after the Ascension Day