



Article by the Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, the Most Revd John McDowell, on taking up his post (Tuesday, 28 April 2020):

“O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures for ever” (Psalm 118:1)

From my point of view at least, it could hardly have been more appropriate that Psalm 118 is set for today’s Morning Office. Many of its phrases are well known and a surprising number have found their way into our liturgies, ranging from the Marriage Service to the Liturgy of Committal. It describes itself as a Song of Victory, and there are undoubtedly martial overtones in some of the verses. But as I read it, the overwhelming impression that it leaves on my mind is as an expression of gratitude, dependence and optimism.

And those are the sentiments uppermost in my own mind and heart today as I take up the office of Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland.

Gratitude to God for calling me to ordained ministry and for the knowledge that his love and forgiveness are always moving ahead of me. Gratitude to my fellow bishops for their encouragement and support. Thankfulness to the hundreds of people from every corner of Ireland who have written, emailed, messaged or in some other way communicated their congratulations, good wishes and the assurance of their prayers. Since the day of my election on 11 March I have felt buoyed up by wave upon wave of goodwill – a silver surfer. I am hoping people will hold onto that goodwill even as I make my first mistakes.

Along with goodwill goes a strong sense of unworthiness and dependence. I almost said, “an overwhelming sense”, and so it would be were it not for the expressions of goodwill I have already mentioned. And, like the psalmist, a sense of dependence on the dependability of God.

I am conscious too of the long line of very distinguished predecessors who have held the office of Primate of All Ireland, and whose scholarship, dedication and spirituality have been an inspiration to me. Most especially I would wish to mention my immediate predecessor the Rt Rev’d Richard Clarke, from whom I learned so much and whose friendship I value enormously.

If that phrase, “John, by Divine Providence, Archbishop of Armagh” has an air of grandiloquence about it, it also has a promise that his making hand will always be on you and me and on the Church we serve, moulding the clay of our vocation to meet the needs of the day. And perhaps, in cases where the clay has hardened with age, to break it and start again.

But I also hold a great degree of optimism, because of the role which God, through the processes of history, has opened out for us – the Church of Ireland – to take in the years to come. In more normal times I would have had an enthronement sermon and a first Presidential Address at the General Synod to have shared some thoughts about our Church and the societies in which we live. You may be relieved to hear that I’m not going to roll them into one diatribe now; but I do want to say a couple of things to do with our distinctiveness and our role in Ireland today.

As a Church we have the potential to model (and in some instances to create) a witness of deep-seated unity that transcends political, social and generational categories. But we can only do so by being true to ourselves, so that we may more fully “become what we are”. We need to become what Our Lord most certainly was. Someone who listened with supernatural patience. And I’m not necessarily talking about formal indaba type conferring, but simply in our own everyday encounters, both formal and informal.



There's a fair bit of truth in the observation that, in Ireland, we listen to others (especially to those with whom we differ) in order to gather ammunition for criticism. We do not listen to hear. Had the plans for the General Synod gone ahead we would have been presented, as a Church, with many opportunities to explain and to listen; to speak and to hear.

Some of those opportunities would have been, on the face of it, very ordinary. I am thinking here of the opportunity to consider the final pieces of legislation in relation to the amalgamation of the Dioceses of Limerick and Killaloe and Tuam, Killala and Achonry, where the General Synod made space for careful listening and a deepening of communion (*koinonia*) between those who would be most immediately affected by the transition. A period of true dialogue and listening (adroitly led by the two bishops concerned) and leading to the building of trust and to positive outcomes with warm feelings likely to germinate seeds for the future.

In this category I'm thinking also of the final stages of the Bill on Diocesan Representation on the General Synod. This was where a group of people from every diocese in Ireland listened patiently to the "whys and wherefores" of equitable (rather than strictly proportionate) representation. In so doing, they had to acknowledge that the voice of Jesus is at least as likely to be heard where we are numerically weak as in places where we are strong. To be both the Church of Christ and the Church of Ireland, we need to respect all its people and to sideline none. In such inclusion, we may become more truly ourselves by being an all-island church which incorporates the characteristics of *all* its regions proudly, rather than being seen as primarily a "Northern" or a "Southern" church.

It is appropriate to recall this seminal statement from the Lambeth Conference of 1948:

"The positive nature of the authority which binds the Anglican Communion together is...moral and spiritual, resting on the truth of the Gospel, and on a charity which is patient, and willing to defer to the common mind".

If a meeting of the General Synod had been possible this year, we would also have had some quite extraordinary opportunities to speak and to listen provided by the chances of history. Here I am thinking, first, of the fact that it was to be held in the venue of Croke Park. This would have offered an opportunity to acknowledge the role which the GAA plays in every corner of this island – surely the most remarkable and influential cultural and sporting organisation in Ireland today. Also perhaps it would have been appropriate in the setting of Croke Park, and given the current Decade of Centenaries, to have reflected on the tragic loss of life which was occurring all over Ireland in 1920; to have listened and spoken about the acknowledgements needed and the lessons learned.

And, also historically significant: the dates of the General Synod were to have coincided with the 75th anniversary of Victory in Europe Day. This would have provided the right sort of space to listen to some balanced words on both the end of that particular phase of the war against Fascism and on the rationale behind Neutrality in that time. As a Christian alternative to a rush to judgement, the Synod might have accommodated a 'listening to hear', rather than a listening to judge.

We are a Church that has traditionally cast its mission in the form of pastoral care. Of course that pastoral care needs to take the form not only of feeding and caring for the sheep but also of finding them. I know many parishes fulfill this role by being deeply involved in their local communities and contributing to the common good. And to be true to ourselves, ours must always be a pastoral evangelization: caring, patient, even perhaps quiet; drawing people to Jesus by the beauty of his person and the depth of his Sacrifice, not by the notion of a competition for souls.



And as we reflect on the Sacrifice of Christ, I want to pause for just a moment to notice and give heartfelt thanks for those people, especially those working in hospitals and care homes, who have put the saving of the lives of others above the protection of their own lives. Some have already paid the ultimate price for their bravery and their compassion. So, if you are reading this, perhaps you would now stop for a moment and say a 'thank you' for all they have done for us.

Almost exactly 100 years ago, another postponed Lambeth Conference took place. It had been due to meet in 1918 but had been deferred due to the Great War. One of the main themes of the Conference considered was the relationships between Churches, many of which had worked closely together during the appalling suffering of the war years. As the Conference met, an exhausted Europe (still conscious in some sense of being "Christendom") was beginning to recover. The fatalities were infinitely greater and the period of suffering much longer, but the sense of *dislocation* which the whole world is experiencing at the minute due to the Covid-19 emergency may be comparable to the trauma of the First World War. In some senses, it is even more destabilising.

Although the 1920 Lambeth Conference was unable to make much progress on the matter of formal church unity, it famously issued *The Appeal to All Christian People*. Rather than addressing itself to formal church structures, the appeal was made to the consciences of individual believers. It ended with these words, hinting at a different form of reconciliation:

"We do not ask that any one Communion should consent to be absorbed in another. We do ask that all should unite in a new and great endeavor: to recover and to manifest to the world the unity of the Body of Christ for which he prayed".

We are now most certainly a post-Christendom, if never quite a post-Christian, society. Perhaps it is for us, a church of a northern majority but insisting on and valuing the voices of southern brothers and sisters in all the councils of our Church, to work towards a coherent understanding and a living-out of reconciliation. Perhaps it is time to allow us, with credibility, to be in our pastoral mission a living Appeal to All People, and to find in that reconciliation both the work of the Spirit and an enduring public good.

Reconciliation is one of the big words of the Gospel. In one sense it was completed with nothing left to do when Our Lord uttered the words, "It is finished"; and found those words vindicated on Easter Day. In another sense, reconciliation is always unfinished, with a need to be begin anew every day. And this beginning involves acknowledging the prejudices and faults which have failed to make us One, as he and the Father are One, as a Church, let alone as Churches.

Reconciliation is the great work (of heart, of brain, and of practicalities) which is crying out for our commitment as children of "the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that Great Shepherd of the sheep". Those who are the agents of reconciliation will always have some kind of destructive energy to absorb; they will always have something to bear that is not, strictly speaking, their own. Without wishing to be too dramatic, the scars of suffering are the tokens of peacemaking, at the very least peacemakers risk bearing the emotional scars of being ridiculed.

Just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminded European Christianity about the costliness of grace, those of us who talk about and plead the urgency of a deepened sense of reconciliation need to make no bones about the cost. And the price to be paid is in no small part the demonstration of the process itself.



Not long before the Second World War, the children's writer A A Milne wrote a book called *Peace with Honour*. By then a pacifist, he made a plea that was shared by many who did not agree with his political views:

“Tell us what to *do*, not what to think. We have done our thinking; we are all of one mind as to what we want – Peace; and now the problem in front of us is how to obtain it”.

And just in case anyone is smiling at the thought of the creator of Winnie the Pooh and Christopher Robin and Tigger having anything serious to tell the world about reconciliation and peace, we would do well to remember the simple pictorial language of the parables and to think about the child whom “Jesus set in the midst of them”.

Sometimes the most challenging and important questions are the most simple. We all want peace, how do we obtain it? If someone was to ask me that same question about Ireland, or about the world that will emerge from the profound insecurity caused by the coronavirus, I'm not sure I would have the answer.

A great sifting process is going on in the world at present. We are at the end of an epoch never mind an era. Old social systems and ways of life are being unmade and new systems and habits and attitudes will have to be brought together to replace them. On top of our historical and social divisions in Ireland, we are being caught in the down draught of a global wind. New animosities will evolve and old ones may survive.

How blessed we would be if we as a Church, amid such unprecedented times of flux, can show ourselves worthy of our calling as peacemakers and reconcilers – even if it is costly – because we rest in his steadfast love which “endures for ever”. Only then might we be able to stand and answer the plea that calls across generations, not least here in Ireland: “We want peace ... tell us what to do”.

+John Armagh
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