

The Archbishop of Armagh's Presidential Address at the Church of Ireland General Synod, Limerick, 4th May 2017

The General Synod of the Church of Ireland will take place from Thursday 4th May to Saturday 6th May in the South Court Hotel, Limerick. The Most Revd Dr Richard Clarke, Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, will deliver his Presidential Address to the Synod shortly after business begins at 12.00 noon on Thursday the 4th.

Archbishop Clarke will focus this year on the theme of identity. He will say, 'Many of the extraordinary changes on the world scene over the past year might reasonably be seen as revolving ultimately around a single conception, that of identity ... Massive difficulties arise when there is a serious clash between differing perceptions of fundamental identity, when each side in the discussion seeks to demean, threaten or even destroy the other, and we have indeed seen many examples of this over recent months, and in many places, near and far.' He will continue, 'What then can easily follow ... is a willingness to replace any obedience to truth with whatever risible nonsense will reinforce our prejudices as we seek to demonise the "otherness" of those we see as different from us, and hence is highly dangerous ... The casual arrival of such a tactic – totally unblushingly - into public discourse in the society of today, in the supposed interests of maintaining one's own cherished identity, has polluted the moral foundations of society itself.'

Archbishop Clarke will say, 'As Christian disciples, we recognise that we do indeed have a basic identity that we must share with all others, that of being made by God in His image and likeness. This means that others – all others – must be treated with a complete dignity and with an utter respect ... There are of course other identities of which we must be aware ... but these cannot be allowed to deface our essential fundamental identity of being loved equally by God. But we are called to find another identity within our Christian calling. This comes through strongly in the Gospels where Christ calls us to find a true identity, not only with those who are like us, or with those whom we find it easy to like or admire, but with those who most need our love and our care.'

Archbishop Clarke will draw on his theme of fear of otherness and insecurity of identity to speak about the refugee crisis, xenophobia and 'the terrifying incidence of domestic abuse and violence' across the island of Ireland. With regard to domestic abuse and violence, he will say, 'It is in every community. It is under our noses, perhaps even in our own families. People who suffer in this way must be encouraged to seek help. When people cannot come to terms with themselves and their real identity, or cannot be at ease with what they are, then the most terrible things can happen ... It is in a world well beyond the comfort of our pews that people are living without meaning or identity, who need love and care, and who do respond ... to unaffected generosity and concern in the name of Jesus Christ.'

A full transcript of Archbishop Clarke's Synod Presidential Address is provided below.

FULL TRANSCRIPT OF THE ARCHBISHOP'S PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

In the short video in which I was asked to appear as a means of welcome to this General Synod, I

suggested that a synod of the Church of Ireland is first and foremost an occasion when the people of God – representing bishops, clergy and laity – gather to work together for God, a serious business indeed. But it is also an occasion when we may enjoy one another's company, renew old friendships and make new friendships. The Church of Ireland is a relatively small community of Christian disciples, and this means that a General Synod takes on something of the character of a family reunion. There is a saying that 'Families are like branches on a tree – we grow in different directions yet our roots remain as one.' This is certainly true for us as a Church family. As we gather together in Limerick (for the first time as a General Synod), let us make the most of this synod in every way. In this context, it is a great pleasure to welcome our guests at synod, representing both the civic life of this city and also the wider family of Christian traditions on this island and beyond.

I would like - at this point - to thank all those who have done the work of preparation for this General Synod. We thank the Bishop of Limerick and Killaloe and all those who have worked with him here in this diocese to welcome us to this city. We are grateful also to the staff of Church House in Dublin and in Belfast and I would ask Mr Ritchie, our Chief Officer and Secretary-General, to convey our thanks to all those who work, both cheerfully and tirelessly, on our behalf throughout the year. Not least we thank him for his work at the heart of the life of the Church. We can truly say of him, given that he still engages in extremely demanding athletic pursuits, that 'he has hit the ground running'.

In recent years, much has been done in many areas in the life of the central Church but I use this opportunity to draw your attention in particular to the tremendous amount of useful and helpful material that is now available on-line to members of the Church of Ireland, wherever they may be. This material covers many aspects of the work of the local Church in addition to the central Church and has been developed as part of the Long-Term Church initiative, equipping members of the Church to serve their communities with more understanding and providing material that will be of great value to them.

As we gather together as a Church family it is right and proper that we note in prayer the deaths of a number of present or former members of general synod, Mrs Brenda Auchmuty of Tuam Diocese who died since the last synod, and also former members, Mr Pen Hatch and Mrs Ros Elliott of Meath and Kildare Dioceses and also Mr Aleck Creighton of Tuam. I would like us also to note the deaths of three other members of General Synod who in many ways were pivotal to our deliberations, albeit in different ways. Last year, Mr Michael Davey was present at the General Synod as an ordinary member, but he had been our assessor between 1988 and 2006, missing only two synods over those nineteen years. He was an extremely affable but an equally effective assessor who gained the respect of all, with his air of calmness coupled with a notable clarity in his explanations of law and process. Dean Victor Griffin, one-time Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral Dublin, was a debater of a type we rarely see or hear today, where passion and cogency, combined with a knowledge of the Church of Ireland as a whole and a great love of the Church, made him a very able and fearless contributor to the deliberations of synod over many years. We remember also before God Bishop Samuel Poyntz, a former Bishop of Cork and of Connor. A man of great vigour, courage and far-sightedness, who resolutely refused to surrender to any element of gloom or negativity from wherever it might have appeared. His confidence in what the Church was called to be was extremely infectious. Many of us knew him also as a caring and diligent pastor, a true Father in God. We thank God for all these

His faithful servants, who by His grace brought so much to the life of the Church.

Many of the extraordinary changes on the world scene over the past year might reasonably be seen as revolving ultimately around a single conception, that of identity. What is our basic identity, is it local or global, is it national or supra-national, is it a particular social, ethnic or religious culture, or does it extend further? In the phrase of Stephan Shakespeare, coined some years ago, is it to be drawbridge up or drawbridge down? Massive difficulties arise when there is a serious clash between differing perceptions of fundamental identity, when each side in the discussion seeks to demean, threaten or even destroy the other, and we have indeed seen many examples of this over recent months, and in many places, near and far. But we would be naïve to imagine that the need for identity is not a basic human instinct. Social psychologists would assure us that we are all hard-wired to require and to defend a particular identity for ourselves, and to be instinctively and resolutely loyal to those we can identify as 'like us' in respect of this identity. What then can easily follow from this, however, is a willingness to replace any obedience to truth with whatever risible nonsense will reinforce our prejudices as we seek to demonise the 'otherness' of those we see as different from us, and hence is highly dangerous. One is reminded of General Sir Ian Hamilton, who commanded the British and allied forces in the Dardanelles campaign in 1915, who recommended such an approach, as 'drawing nourishment from the sins of the enemy. If there are no sins, invent them! The aim is to make the enemy so great a monster that he forfeits the rights of a human being.' The casual arrival of such a tactic – totally unblushingly - into public discourse in the society of today, in the supposed interests of maintaining one's own cherished identity, has polluted the moral foundations of society itself.

As Christian disciples, we recognise that we do indeed have a basic identity that we must share with all others, that of being made by God in His image and likeness. This means that others – all others – must be treated with a complete dignity and with an utter respect, regardless of who and what they are, what they think or what they do. There are of course other identities of which we must be aware – identities of culture, of religious affiliation, of ethnicity, of sexuality, of nationality – but these cannot be allowed to deface our essential fundamental identity of being loved equally by God. But we are called to find another identity within our Christian calling. This comes through strongly in the Gospels where Christ calls us to find a true identity, not only with those who are like us, or with those whom we find it easy to like or admire, but with those who most need our love and our care. Hence, the Good Samaritan finds an identity with someone who would avoid and despise him in any other circumstance but who now needs his help. The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew's Gospel is a stern reminder that we find identity with Christ in those to whom we hold out our hand in unselfconscious care – those who are homeless, regardless of why they are homeless, those who are in prison, regardless of whether they are guilty of some crime or not, or those who are without the means to have decent clothes or any clothes at all, regardless of whether or not it was fecklessness, dishonesty or addictions that put them into that situation. The identity that we must have and truly believe we have is with those who need us, and therefore we must hold to such an identity willingly and ungrudgingly.

Perhaps the most obvious area in which we should be able to see this is in relation to the refugee crisis that is sweeping the world at present, and which has become a focus for many people's complaint that 'their identity' is somehow being threatened by immigration. The United Nations

Refugee Agency estimates that, worldwide, there are almost 60 million forcibly displaced people; over 45 million men, women and children are being helped or protected by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and over half of all refugees are under 18 years old. But, as we consider the European aspects of the refugee crisis, we need first to understand that nearly 90% of all known refugees are being cared for, not here in Europe, but in the developing world, those countries that can least afford any influx of impoverished newcomers.

Turning to the response of Ireland, north and south, to the current refugee crisis, it is a mixed picture. Northern Ireland is taking very few refugees, but there is an indication of good organisation for those who will be allowed into that jurisdiction. The Republic of Ireland has agreed to take a far larger number, proportionately, but there is little sign that an infrastructure is yet ready for this. In neither case are many refugees being admitted, a few thousand at most on an island with a total population of almost six and a half million. When it became clear that there was a migrant crisis of unprecedented proportions for this part of the world, the Church of Ireland set up two working groups, one for Northern Ireland and one for the Republic, to work with other Christian traditions, other faith groups and also to liaise with government and with organisations that were organising aid in some way for those entering this country as refugees. The Northern Ireland group is headed by the Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, and the Republic of Ireland group by the Bishop of Tuam, Killala and Achonry. In this context, I commend the resource pack on supporting asylum seekers and refugees recently produced by these groups and thank those responsible for its production. It is available on-line on the Church of Ireland web-site.

This is a supremely practical matter. We need to be ready to protect, in every way we can and in every part of this island, those refugees and asylum seekers who are already here in Ireland, but who are now being treated with indifference, or with suspicion, hostility and even violence. The Immigrant Council of Ireland has revealed that reports of Islamophobia rose by 35 per cent in one year, 2015, in the Republic of Ireland. All people who are here as refugees or asylum seekers should be met with the dignity, justice and humanitarian support that they deserve, and ideally within a programme that is integrated across the entire board. This should include those asylum seekers who are already in the country and have been so for some time, a category that can very easily be forgotten. But one thing of which we must be certain is that those who are here among us as bona fide refugees have not left their homelands for motives other than sheer desperation.

But if we can see how xenophobia and a more generalised fear of the otherness of those who seem unlike us may be an outcome for those who are insecure in their own identity, we also need to understand how there are other more hidden but equally dangerous aspects to that human insecurity. There are many around us today, in every age group and every social class, who are not at ease with themselves and who cannot find their true identity. One of the terrible outcomes of this is in the terrifying incidence of domestic abuse and violence in Ireland today. Inevitably victims are more often female than male but this is not the entire picture. What is immensely disturbing is that the incidence of reported violence is so high (and we know that it cuts across all social classes and all socio-economic groups) that we must therefore assume that it is present within every community represented here today. Globally, at least 1 in 3 women, or up to one billion women, have been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in their lifetimes. In the Republic of Ireland, one in five women in a relationship have been abused by a present or former partner. In Northern Ireland,

the Police Service responds to an incident of domestic violence every nineteen minutes on average, day and night, seven days a week. In Ireland as a whole, 1 in 7 women and 1 in 17 men experience severe domestic violence. Domestic abuse may be violent, but it may also be more subtle – economic or psychological – but nonetheless devastating in its impact. And we know, much domestic violence and abuse goes unreported, whether through fear or manipulation.

We could continue with statistics indefinitely, but what is most important is to realise that this is not an issue out there, among those we think of as other people, utterly unlike us. It is in every community. It is under our noses, perhaps even in our own families. People who suffer in this way must be encouraged to seek help. When people cannot come to terms with themselves and their real identity, or cannot be at ease with what they are, then the most terrible things can happen. One of the possibilities that we are investigating in Armagh Diocese is how parish churches can be designated as “safe places” for those who are suffering domestic abuse. For many people, in every part of this island, the Church does not have a reputation as being a place of safety, far from it. Surely we can work together to reverse this notion of what we are.

Last September it was a joy and privilege to welcome the members of the Anglican-Orthodox International Commission for Theological Dialogue to Armagh. It was an honour for the Church of Ireland to host such an international Church gathering and equally so for me on a personal basis as the current co-chair of the Commission. We so often take our spiritual identity for granted here in Ireland particularly within the Anglican tradition and yet we have a rich heritage which should be acknowledged and celebrated. During that week in the autumn, our visitors constantly reminded us of the great spirituality they sensed in this place, they rejoiced in the great heritage of Saint Patrick known throughout the world, and also in the warmth of our fellowship. Sometimes it takes outsiders, or at least those who don't live amongst us, to show us and remind us of the special and unique identity we have as Christians in this land. It is an identity which we should cherish and never take for granted, one which holds within it and offers such great spiritual riches.

Finally, I want to suggest to synod that we expand our understanding of our identity in a different way. I have suggested that our understanding of Christian identity should be our utter solidarity with those who need us. Much of our understanding of ministry is related to our engagement with those who are, metaphorically at least, within our walls. We expend relatively little on chaplaincy work. Indeed we rely on the state, whether in Northern Ireland or the Republic, to provide most of the financial support necessary. In consequence, chaplaincy ministry – whether in hospitals, in prisons, in universities, in institutions such as our police service – is simply under-resourced. But it is in a world out there – out in a world which barely knows us, or which finds it hard to believe that we have anything to offer – that there is pain, weariness, depression, loneliness and stress of every kind.

It is in a world well beyond the comfort of our pews that people are living without meaning or identity, who need love and care, and who do respond, not to proselytisation or badgering, but to unaffected generosity and concern in the name of Jesus Christ. They will not find us of their own volition. We need to find them and to be there for them. Can we have the courage and the faith to believe that our identity is not simply among those who resemble us in ways that give us pleasure, but with those whom Christ also loves, who need his love and hence our love?