

General Synod Service 2022

John 6:35-40

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we meet together for this General Synod service we do so with joy and a heightened sense of appreciation for the fact that once again, we are able to gather from across the Church of Ireland, for much has changed since General Synod members last shared Holy Communion in St Columb's Cathedral in Derry in 2019.

Along with the rest of humanity, our church, our dioceses and parishes saw our pattern of life interrupted unexpectedly as a result of that now infamous global pandemic! We were forced to stop, to cease our regular patterns of activity and to wait patiently for science and medicine to regain the upper hand.

Happily, amongst all the difficulties, we can tell many positive stories - stories of clergy and congregations demonstrating imagination and innovation as they adapted and sought out new ways to keep connected with parishioners and to reach out in service to the communities around them.

But there can be little doubt that there have been many challenges too - and many changes. (Aside from the changes forced on us by Covid, it's quite remarkable to consider that only four dioceses in the whole Church of Ireland have the same bishop that they had when we last met as a General Synod!) As we emerge into the world of 2022 in many ways there is a 'stocktaking' happening in places across the church.

- What will our life together look like going forward?
- Shall we resume all the same service plans and patterns of parish activity that we followed before Covid?
- What can we do about the people who have not yet come back to church?
- Are there aspects of what we did that previously seemed important that no longer seem as appropriate or relevant to us today

In short, what will our priorities be in the Church of Ireland in the years ahead?

Today's reading from John's gospel might offer us the bones of a reality check and may help us reflect on where those priorities ought to be. As Jesus speaks to the crowd who have come after him, he offers an invitation that provides both the opportunity of profound hope and and heart-searching challenge.

And he begins with the challenge! As Jesus meets those in this crowd that has again sought him out, he says to them "Why are you following?" "What is it you are doing here?" He asks them to examine their motives and suggests that they may be there because they want something from him that will satisfy their curiosity, or feed their hunger for something that will please or entertain. They have seen, but yet do not believe; they are in danger of being in the midst of everything that is going on, but missing out on what is central. Christ's heart is for them, and so he does not affirm them in what they are looking for, but challenges them to find what they really need instead!

Is there a danger in our 21st century consumer society that even the church can become caught up in the business of offering people that which appears to please, rather than concentrate on introducing them to the one who will truly satisfy their deep spiritual hunger?

Using the imagery of the bread with which he had earlier fed the crowd, of which they want more, Jesus says to them "I am the bread of life, whoever comes to me will never be hungry and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty"

We are reminded afresh that Christianity is a faith that is centred on a person and not an institution, or a building, or a code. What is it that truly constitutes us as the church? It is that we are people who, like the disciples of old, have heard the invitation of Jesus Christ to "Come, follow me", have recognised the importance and the authenticity of his call and have sought to respond to it.

As Jesus speaks, he reminds us that his life and earthly ministry are shaped by obedience to the will of God the Father. "I have come....not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me".

In doing so he speaks of the good and generous will of the Father that all might find life through faith in the Son. Resurrection life, eternal life, the life in the presence of God that we were created for!

Jesus' life of service, his proclaiming of the kingdom of God, his healing and miraculous demonstrations of the power of God at work in him, his death and resurrection are all directed towards that aim of enabling people to find that life.

As we shape the worship and witness of the church today, is our priority that we might more effectively help one another to hear the call of Christ to "Come, follow me"?

Often we will do that in ways that are reassuringly familiar to us, in gathering to share in moments like this when we participate in time-honoured liturgy that proclaims Christ in Word and Sacrament.

At other times we may need to look to new, pioneering patterns of service to assist in reaching a generation of people that the church has passed by. That may be stretching, it may be challenging, at times it may take us beyond our comfort zones, but it is no less faithful church-building activity for that.

As we share in the work of the General Synod over these next few days, we will have opportunities in some small ways to take decisions which will help to shape the way that we work as a church. From adopting new patterns for conducting our synods and meetings, to bigger decisions such as stepping out in faith to resource Pioneer Ministry across the Church of Ireland we will discuss and decide together how we will work.

We will enjoy fellowship with one another as we share in that work and in those conversations around the edges of the synod that we have missed so much in the last couple of years. In all this, and in the work we will continue locally when we return home, may we be guided by the desire to come afresh ourselves to Christ, who is the bread of life, and to prioritise sharing his life-giving gospel with all who will receive him.

NOW unto him who is able to do abundantly more than all that we ask or think according to the power at work in us, unto him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus

throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.