

**Presidential Address to Armagh Diocesan Synod by Archbishop John McDowell
Wednesday, 19 October 2022**

Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Although in the past two years I have begun this address by saying how strange it was to be meeting online, it now feels very strange to be meeting in person; strange to be doing for the first time in two years what we had been doing for 150 years. But I cannot begin to tell you how good it is to see you in this Synod Hall, gathered as representatives from the parishes of the Diocese to take council together- with the emphasis on the word *together*.

The Christian religion and the religion of Christians is centred on relationships. It has its origin in the relationship of God in Trinity, then in the relationship of that God to the cosmos which he created out of nothing, and therefore which ever after meant that no single created thing was, or ever could be, of no value. I shall say something more about that a little later. And relationships continued to be central to our discipleship-moving from the special calling and relationship of God with Israel, and widening universally into our adoption as sons and daughters of the Father in his Son.

This Diocesan Synod is a rather business-like expression of that web of relationships which comes together to make up the Catholic Church throughout history. However because it is business-like does not mean that it is ordinary. I have often said that there is nothing more extraordinary than a parish church. People who, by the operation of the Spirit, through the contingencies of history, happen to live in the same small area, and who come together with all their variety and complexity to worship the living God and to work together to witness to His Name and to work together for the good of their community.

And before we move onto the more everyday considerations of the Synod's business, I would also you to consider this. The Church in the present day-that is you and me- has lived through one of the great cataclysms of history. A world wide pandemic' at least as virulent as the Black Death which wiped out nearly half the population of Europe in the fourteenth century and which was the demographic shock which led to civil and religious conflicts of early modern Europe.

Something similar is happening in Ukraine today, but the combination of advanced medical research, the wide reach of the State and a new international solidarity have meant that the catastrophic geopolitical effects of the Black Death have not been repeated with the much more widespread, and nearly as deadly, Covid pandemic.

To be sure there has been and continues to be much pain, manifold errors of judgement, and a good deal of uncertainty. Governments come and go. Large numbers of people left the workplace during furlough and, it seems, have never returned. Walking or driving through many of our cities, towns and villages it seems almost as though every their shop or small business is boarded up. Not everyone has returned to worship and some may never do so; but of course others have a newly awakened seriousness about the big issues in life to which we believe God gives answers in the life and death and resurrection of His Son.

Pastorally speaking we have a huge task ahead in our parishes as we seek to rebuild confidence and find ways (as we did during the worst of the pandemic) of bringing our

distinctive contribution to the life of the communities where we live. It is only if we look outwards, that we will grow in faith, love, hope and number.

At the Service of Thanksgiving for the life of Her Majesty the Queen held in St Anne's Cathedral, Belfast, in the week following her death, we sang the old hymn 'The Day Thou gavest Lord is ended'. The final verse of that hymn is a good summary of what we have come through in this age as in every age:

*So be it Lord thy throne shall never
Like earth's proud empires pass away
Thy Kingdom stands and grows for ever
Till all thy creatures own thy sway.*

Although it can be difficult to think about ourselves in this way, it was CS Lewis who reminded his generation that although the small group of people gathered together to worship Sunday by Sunday may look insignificant, if we could only see it stretched throughout time to include all previous and future generations, and in the light of eternity, then it would look like "an army mighty with banners".

So, let's be grateful to God that we are meeting here together again, grateful for the fellowship he has called us to. Although it is as important as ever, the business of the Synod is not heavy this year. Let's enjoy one another's company and thank God also for the people around us and for all that they bring to our common life and witness; and without whom our own discipleship would be so much less complete. Let us thank God that we have been called to serve him in our parishes and on this Synod, and do so cheerfully. For God loves a cheerful servant.

Her Majesty the Queen

It would be remiss of me not to mention the death of Queen Elizabeth. There have been many warm tributes paid to her Late Majesty's sense of duty and the selflessness of her life of service. It was an enormous privilege and responsibility to have been asked to preach at the Civic Service of Thanksgiving in Belfast Cathedral, and in all that I and the other Church Leaders said over this period, we tried to underline the Late Queen's very strong faith and her desire to serve a Christian monarch.

Needless to say it was also a privilege to have been invited to attend the State Funeral in Westminster Abbey, where (as I have written in a little booklet to be published later this month) I was determined, amidst all the pomp and ceremony, not to let my mind wander far from the two unseen presences in the Abbey that day – the presence of God himself and of the mortal remains of the little Queen sealed inside that enormous lead lined coffin.

As I said directly to the King at that service in Belfast Cathedral, his loss is great, and he and his family will remain in our prayers for a long time to come.

Work of the parishes and Diocese

As far as I can tell the work which goes on in parishes has been returning to some form of a newish normality. It may not yet be as extensive as it was pre-2020, and I have no doubt that all sorts of adjustments and/or extra efforts will be needed to plot a new way forward

in changed circumstances, yet the vital work of witness and support continues. We have been warned that this will be a hard winter and to expect turbulence in economic affairs. With all their differences (relative stability in the Republic but constant change in the UK) this seems to be the case both North and South of the Border. Clergy and others tell me that it is not only people on benefits or on very low income who are apprehensive about the winter, but also those who in normal circumstances would not have the same money worries.

I have no doubt that for all these reasons it will be a challenging year, but I know that as you have proved over the past two winters, you will do all that you can in practical and other ways to be salt and light in your communities.

Although the work of the Diocese as a central body and place of administration has continued throughout the past two and a bit years, it hasn't really been possible (because of restrictions on gathering) for some of our diocesan committees to have met as regularly as usual, which is why some Reports are thinner than usual. However I look forward to that changing as we move in 2023 and beyond.

That we have been able to function fully as a Diocesan organisation in so many ways is, of course, due largely to the commitment and expertise of the staff of the Diocesan Office. That makes it sound like a great bureaucratic machine – when in fact it is Jane and Jennifer in the Diocesan Office and Pamela in my own office. I want to thank them on our behalf for all they do far beyond the strict terms of their employment.

I think it is fair to say that over the past few years (and not simply because of Covid) Jennifer's task in maintaining the rota and finding clergy persons and Readers to cover during vacancies and illnesses has been an absolutely epic task, which Jennifer carries out with great thoughtfulness and determination. It may be in the future that it will not be possible to provide cover for every single service, particularly during a vacancy, but I know that every effort will be made to provide a good level of ministerial provision in all circumstances.

Vocations

The problem goes right back to the root of relatively small numbers of candidates offering for Selection for Ordination training. The Church of Ireland has roughly 500 stipendiary clergy, but has about 90 vacant incumbencies at any one time. That is a challenge for the bishops, for the central Church and for the General Synod, so I don't want to dwell on it for long this afternoon. However, we do have a part to play in nurturing vocations. As a diocese we haven't been much above average in providing ordinands and unless the Church of Ireland, is going to become a Church of the big cities and the eastern seaboard in both jurisdictions, we need to be encouraging more people from the average parish to consider ordination.

Very often (in fact almost always) that begins with encouragement from fellow parishioners. The words "Have you ever thought of..." have been the beginning of most vocations, as has been the encouragement of lay people that the day to day life of a clergyperson – a life of study, prayer, worship, visiting and caring at the heart of a community – is a fulfilling life and a good life.

Flourish

Alongside that sort of continuity, innovation is also needed. Not innovation for the sake of change, and certainly not innovation that aims at “doing a job” on the Church of Ireland way of mission-led through pastoral ministry.

A little later in this Synod I will ask that you agree to the suspension of Standing Orders so that we can hear and see a presentation about a proposed diocesan creation care initiative called *Flourish*. The two people who I have asked to take a lead in this initiative – the Revd David McComb and Mr David Brown – will explain the plan for the next few years during the presentation. However, it really is my hope that every parish (rural, urban and suburban) will in time find something worthwhile they can contribute to this initiative.

The care of God’s creation is one of the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion. There is probably nothing which matters more to young people today, than that we do not leave them with a legacy of exploitation and destruction on a local or on a worldwide scale. ‘Care’ is the opposite of ‘exploitation’ and I commend everything that the two Davids will present to you a little later.

Personalia

I will wind up this Address shortly, but before that I would like to comment on a couple of noteworthy changes.

Many of you will have heard that Archdeacon Terry Scott announced that he will be retiring as rector of St Swithin’s, Magherafelt, with effect from the end of January 2023, which will mean also relinquishing his role as Archdeacon of Armagh. I won’t embarrass Terry just yet with too fulsome a valedictory (apart from anything else there’s work to do between now and the end of January). However this will be Terry’s final Diocesan Synod and I want to say how constant, wise and reliable he has been during my short time in the Diocese and how much all his friendship and care have meant to so many of his colleagues and co-workers.

Sir Paul Girvan has been Chancellor of the Diocese of Armagh (that is, the legal adviser to the Archbishop particularly on matters relating to the Constitution of the Church of Ireland) and Assessor for the Diocesan Synod and indicated to me some time ago that he felt it was time to step down from that office.

Apart from having his very reassuring presence beside me at Diocesan Synods, Sir Paul has provided me with support and expert confidential advice on a range of issues and I am very grateful to him for the willingness and cheerfulness which have characterised his contribution as Chancellor. As an Archbishop and as a diocese we have been very fortunate to have been able to call on Sir Paul’s life time of legal expertise.

And while we are on the subject of thanks, although he’s not going away for a long time yet, if I could thank also Mr Jonathan Hull, our Diocesan Communications Officer for his continued support and presence at virtually everything that happens anywhere in this Diocese. Jonathan we are very grateful.

Finally

One of the great blessings of the opening up of society all over the world, is that I now have a little more opportunity to exercise those other two elements of my role as Archbishop of Armagh – that is as Primate of All Ireland and as a member of three of the Instruments of Communion within Anglicanism. So, for instance I am able to take up preaching and other engagements all over this island more frequently now, and early in the new year I will be making short trips to Ghana and Tanzania.

And of course we had a very much delayed meeting of the Lambeth Conference for Bishops earlier in the summer. It was my first Lambeth Conference, and as they are called at most once every ten years, it will also be my last. The Bishop of Tuam and I have given our reflections elsewhere on the proceedings. At the very least it provided a very welcome opportunity to meet a very diverse group of episcopal colleagues, many of whom minister in circumstances much more challenging than our own, and in cultures very different from those of these islands.

However, the older one gets, the more one never wants to be far from home for too long. Armagh has become home even in the oddest of circumstances and above all it is my wish and my prayer that this Diocese continues in its witness to the faith of Jesus Christ as it has been received by the Church of Ireland, and which has been kept unbroken over many centuries (I don't let the Archbishop of Canterbury forget that my predecessor St Patrick established Christianity in Ireland at least one hundred years before Augustine landed in Kent). It is my prayer too that we are a happy diocese, at peace, as far as lies within us, with one another and with our neighbours who we are called to serve.

+John Armagh
October 2022