

On the afternoon of the 7<sup>th</sup> of September in 1980, Bishop James Mehaffey heard these words: 'Hold up the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, bring again the outcasts, seek the lost.' It was the occasion of his Service of Consecration as a Bishop. And as he knelt at that turning point in his life and his experience, those were the words of commission held out to any of us who were called to be a bishop.

And I cannot help but feel this afternoon, as we meet with his loved ones to pay our own individual tribute to a remarkable servant of God and His church, that those words are a starting point for our recollection of a wonderful man: 'Hold up the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, bring again the outcasts, seek the lost.'

Those were the hallmarks which began back in 1954 in East Belfast when the young Curate, James Mehaffey, began his ministry in St Patrick's, Ballymacarrett. His Rector then was to become his bishop and mine in later years, the late George Quin. And from that experience which took him to England and the Diocese of Southwark, James was to work in Down Cathedral in Downpatrick, to move to St Christopher's in East Belfast, and then to – as we've been reminded – Kilkeel. From there, in 1966, his pilgrimage took him back to East Belfast, and the Parish of St Finian's. I was the neighbouring Rector in Gilnahirk, and the friendship that we were to enjoy to the end of his life was fostered.

For many of the problems in the parochial ministry in that place and in that time were common to both of us and I began to understand the gifts that God was using in Jim's life.

During the period in Down and Dromore, he became the first Diocesan Missioner in the Church of Ireland – a task which, like many new tasks in the Church and elsewhere – it's very much up to the person involved to decide the agenda and decide the programme, and those of us who knew him well know that it wasn't without some unease that he undertook that task for Bishop Quin. For the work was to reach out not only to the parishes but to the clergy and it gave him the opportunity which then – how times have changed – which then were opportunities to renew their own experience that perhaps for many of them had ceased at ordination.

As Diocesan Missioner, Jim Mehaffey gave all of us in the parochial ministry much to think about. And the next step in which he and I were associated was to bring even to another level his thinking, his thought and his philosophy, for the Church of Ireland in its wisdom decided the Almighty was calling it to set up a Priorities Committee – a Priorities Committee – which was eventually to produce a report on the future of the Church of Ireland called 'First of All'.

As time has passed, and our friends the political representatives present this afternoon will perhaps understand what I mean when I say first of all as a priority has its own message. In that work, Jim developed that which he had gained in the parishes but chiefly his work as a missioner. Often I still hear his voice at those meetings of our Priorities Committee saying, 'Hold on, hold on. You've lost sight of why we're here.' You've lost sight of why we're here.

If there is a hallmark as he moved to this city to be your Bishop, if there is a hallmark that I would have as part of his legacy, it is those words: 'Hold on, you've lost sight of why we're here.' You've lost sight that the reconciliation in our community which was so fostered by Edward Daly and James Mehaffey must never be lost sight of. You've lost sight of the wonderful rewards of reconciliation or in reaching out hands of friendship. And within the Church, you've lost sight at times of your roots – the roots that have given you the commission of God to be alive for all sorts and conditions of people.

For Bishop Jim, this was his priority as he worked with Edward and other leaders to bind up the broken, to heal the wounds of the lost, to make people remember why you're here, that in the short gift of a lifespan you must grasp every opportunity to do things for the good of all – across the barriers, across the river and across the divisions.

This was his ministry as a Bishop. It was a ministry exercised in those dark days of suffering, misunderstanding, suspicion, and it was a ministry which was being true to the commission given to him in September 1980: 'Hold up the weak, heal the sick, bind up the broken, bring again the outcasts, seek the lost.'

James and I often talked in private of our respective work and I've no doubt in my mind that the God who called him to be a bishop allowed the gifts that he had cultured at another level to be given an expression through his bishopric. And if Thelma will forgive me, I can divulge one sentence which will long remain part of James's legacy for me. We were talking about the role of the Church in those dreadful days. We were talking about how often we could be misunderstood by saying the wrong word and even the wrong emphasis in public. He spoke of his experience here and I spoke of my memories of this place. And I said to him, "James, what are you learning about what those people need and want?" He thought for a moment and then in that quizzical voice that you all loved so much, he said to me, "Robin, it's the calling to ask why we're here and what's the reason?" 'To hold up the weak, to heal the sick, to bind up the broken, to bring again the outcasts and to seek the lost.'

Thelma, the strength that you gave all those years to your beloved Jim was something that he actually often talked about. You wouldn't know that, but when he and I and several of our colleagues would talk about the pressures on family life of what we were called to do, the one common denominator for Jim Mehaffey was "Thank God for my family and thank God for Thelma." What a tribute. What a binding of your years together.

And at this moment when our love and sympathy reach out to you, to Wendy – what a tribute you've paid him – to Tim, to Julia, to Ellen, to Catherine, to Tom and to Rosie, at this moment you're in our prayers. But you're also in our joy – in our joy! – for the commissioning that Jim received back in 1980 was lived out and achieved in his work and you gave him the strength to do it.

The prayer that I have quoted from his consecration didn't end which those words that I've been giving. But they ended with words which bring you and your family and all of us right up to date at this moment. For the prayer and commission ends with these words: 'Do all this that when the chief shepherd shall appear, you may receive the never fading crown of glory.'

I have no doubt that as we reflect on it all, Jim has had that greeting, 'Well done thou good and faithful servant. Enter into my kingdom.'

On behalf of a very wide circle, may I express to you our love and our sympathy, and may I on behalf of that circle say, "Thank God", for Jim Mehoffey bound up those wounds and gave the leadership his Church needed and for which we thank God.