

The Diocese of Down and Dromore  
Diocesan Synod  
Thursday 19 October, 2017

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

The Rt Revd Harold Miller,  
Bishop of Down and Dromore

Greetings to all of you, in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

*Greetings*

Special greetings to those who are new members of diocesan synod for this triennium, to our visitors, and especially to our brother in the Lord, **Bishop Justin Badi**, and his wife **Mama Joyce**, who have come all the way from our companionship diocese in South Sudan to be with us today. Bishop Justin will be the preacher at our Holy Communion service later this morning, and we want to assure him of our love, prayers and support for the work of the diocese of Maridi, with whom we have been linked in the Gospel since 1999. The link began when Liz and I went with Paul Clark and a team from UTV, into Maridi diocese, as people returned from being refugees, to tell their story in a television programme that Easter Day called 'The Resurrection People'. Justin, you and your people have been in our constant prayers at this difficult time in South Sudan.

I will introduce and welcome our other visitors later in the morning.

We meet this morning in this wonderful parish centre in Moira, which came to be out of our own suffering here in Northern Ireland. You may not all know this, but in 1997 the IRA planted a bomb here in Moira to blow up the police station. Thankfully no-one was injured, but collateral damage included the old church hall, which had to be demolished and this parish centre rose in its place. It is now packed every Sunday morning with a congregation of all ages, additional to the three services in the parish church. In truth it is at times too small for the numbers, and has a Sunday School with more than 100 children. I want to recognise today, that much of the work in building that up was done by **Archdeacon Roderic West**, and by the present rector, and former curate, **Joanne Megarrell**. Sadly, Joanne is not able to be with us today, as she was taken ill on holiday during August, and has been ordered by her doctors to stay at home and recover - something which does not come easily to Joanne. Please hold her in your prayers and love over these weeks of recovery.

Having said that, we thank the people of the parish of Moira, their Select Vestry and especially their curate, **Peter Munce**, for doing so much to welcome us and prepare for this synod, at a time of real challenge for them.

*Changes in the Diocese Staff Team*

I also want to welcome some new faces at the top table. 2016 was a year of change in the Diocesan Office. We moved from a structure which had been in place since 1945, where there was a joint diocesan administrative staff to serve the two dioceses of Connor and Down and Dromore (which were, of course, originally one diocese), to a new structure where each diocese had a dedicated floor and a separate staff team. The floor on which Down and Dromore is situated in Church House Belfast, is the second floor.

In the process of the changes, we said farewell to **June Butler** as Diocesan Secretary, though June is still very much with us in the diocese, as a member of Saintfield Parish, Diocesan President of the Mothers Union, and indeed as a member of this synod. I also want to say publically how sad we were to hear of the death of June's husband Kevin earlier this year.

We also said farewell to **David Cromie** who had been Diocesan Accountant for many years, and I would like us to convey our condolences to David on the recent death of his father, the Very Revd Howard Cromie, a former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

The new faces we welcome to the table are:

- Our new Diocesan Secretary, **Roy Lawther**, who came to us from his work in integrating two local borough councils (Castlereagh and Lisburn) into one of the new super-councils, and who is a parishioner and former churchwarden at St Columbanus, Ballyholme. He is also a Sandhurst man!

If the synod is kind enough to allow me to suspend standing orders later in the proceedings, I will ask Roy to share one part of the work he has just completed.

and

- Our new Finance Officer, **Brian Lavery**, whom many of you will know from his work in finance with Church Mission Society Ireland, and who is a parishioner of St Finnian's in Cregagh. I first met Brian many years ago when he fell in love with a young lady, May, who had been a student living in the Church of Ireland Centre at Queen's University. I hope Brian will address the synod when we come to our diocesan accounts.

I will mention other members of the team later in our proceedings.

It has been a bit of a baptism of fire for the new team, which was only finally fully in place around the beginning of February, with all the changes to the system, and with planning for this year of triennial elections. There is still some distance to go to complete the transition, but I am absolutely confident that we have embraced the right model for the future. It is simple, clearly focussed, and has financial benefits. I ask you to bear with the team in their first synod together as they, as well as many of you, are learning, and I ask that you speak in gentleness, with generosity and kindness.

To complete the 'admin' picture, **Tracey Taggart**, whom we know so well and depend on so much, is now the Administrative Officer of the diocese, and much of the work of planning for the synod has fallen on her shoulders. And the very capable and experienced **Mary Coles**, who has been with us since 1999, is now my full-time PA, and the welcoming voice at the other end of the phone line. We said our goodbyes in November to my former secretary, Margaret Wilson, and I also want to record my grateful thanks to her for her service to me and to the diocese.

To sum up, we wish God's blessing on all who have served us in the past, and I ask for your prayers and support for all who serve us in the present and into the future. Change is always difficult, and challenging to all concerned, and it is to the subject of CHANGE that I will return in a few moments.

## ***Personal Thanks***

Before I do so, I would very much like to use these introductory thoughts to say a very grateful word of thanks for all the support I have received from so many of you during my time of illness earlier this year. I have been greatly blessed by the Lord throughout my life with health, strength and a high degree of energy, so going through radiotherapy and other treatment for prostate cancer was a wee bit of a new challenge for me. Thankfully, I only had to take two weeks and three Sundays off work, but I have known what so many people have testified to in the past - a sense of the upholding power of the prayers of others surrounding me. For that, I am more grateful that I can express. Thankfully, the outcome of the wonderful treatment I received at the Cancer Centre in the City Hospital, has been very good, though I confess to not having quite as much energy as when I was younger! Thank you for your love and support.

## ***500th Anniversary of the Reformation***

It is to the subject of CHANGE that I now wish to turn. I'm sure I do not need to remind anyone here that 2017 is being observed as the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Whether Martin Luther ever actually nailed his 95 theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg or not is a matter of dispute which historians can seek to answer. If he did, it is commemorated on 31 October. So this month is at the heart of the 500th commemoration of the Reformation. As you know, to mark the occasion, we focussed in this year's Bible Week on passages from the Letter to the Romans which were influential in the rediscovery of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, which was at the heart of the Reformation. We even sang three times Luther's famous and wonderful hymn, 'Ein Feste Burg', - 'A mighty fortress is our God', sadly unknown to many who claim adherence to the Reformation. That hymn is a version of Psalm 46, with both the words and the tune written by Martin Luther. I would that every parish in the diocese would sing it on the last Sunday of this month, but I won't be holding my breath, though I do know that many of our parishes will be having special service to give thanks to the Lord for all that was good in the Reformation.

Of course, 31 October 1517 might be seen as a 'tipping point' in the Reformation, and Martin Luther might be seen as the key figure, but the Reformation did not simply begin in 1517, or even in the 16th Century - it began many years before that.

My first real realisation of that fact was when, as a student, I visited communist Czechoslovakia, and was taken through Prague by the pastor of a Czech church, telling us of the wonders of Jan Hus, and showing us the Bethlehem Chapel. Jan Hus, whose statue stands in pole position still on the Old Town Square in Prague, was burnt at the stake for his reforming beliefs in 1415, more than a century before the anniversary we celebrate this month!

Or take the better known John Wycliffe, after whom Wycliffe College Oxford and the Wycliffe Bible Translators are named. That brings us closer to home, as his witness was focussed in England, where he was rector of Lutterworth. His themes were the reformers' themes. He famously said 'Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on his sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by his righteousness.' When brought to a hearing before the Archbishop of Canterbury of that time, he declared: 'I am ready to defend my convictions even unto death....I have followed the sacred scriptures and the holy doctors.' He gave his life to translating the scriptures into plain English, and lived and died entirely in the 14th Century. Wycliffe was an important influence on the thinking of Jan Hus.

So, the build up to the Reformation as we celebrate it, took place incrementally over decades and even centuries, was influenced by theological insights, politics, philosophy, power bases and all the rest, but came to a heady 'tipping point' in what we celebrate this month.

### ***500-yearly 'Rummage Sales***

You may, at this point, wonder where all of this is leading to. A Presidential Address at a Diocesan Synod should not be a history lesson, especially when the bishop is not an historian! Well, it is leading to an idea from a book which has been very influential in my thinking about where we have arrived in our own day and age. The book is called *The Great Emergence: How Christianity is changing, and why*. It is written by a lay theologian who was a member of The Episcopal Church in the USA, and who died just a couple of years ago. You may have heard me speak of her before, as her name is memorable: Phyllis Tickle. Now, in case some of you are worried, I do not entirely 'buy' everything in her book, which is largely about Emergent Church in the USA, but she posits a thesis which is a very good conversation starter, and may well help to shed light on the particular times in which we are living. The thesis was not original to Phyllis Tickle, and she attributes it to Bishop Mark Dyer, who was Bishop of Bethlehem, in the US. Here it is in brief:

Every five hundred years or so, the Church goes through a massive 'rummage sale'. Things which have gathered around the church but have become tired, no longer meaningful or useful; things which have lost their focus, as we would beautifully say in Ulster, are 'rid out'. Another way we could put it, is that there are times when what we are experiencing in the church, and indeed in society, is not just incremental change, but a tectonic shift.

So we celebrate the tectonic shift of the Protestant Reformation this month. If we went back five hundred years or so before that, we would have experienced the tectonic East/West divide in the Church; five hundred years before that, the completion of the defining of Christian faith, the fall of the Roman Empire, and the development of monasticism which would hold the faith during the Dark Ages. Five hundred years before that is the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus himself, the establishment of Christianity and the fall of Jerusalem. And we can even go back five hundred years before that, to the destruction of the first temple in Jerusalem. Phyllis Tickle would suggest that these five hundred year periods are evident in Judaism as well.

It's just an idea, a hook to hang our thinking on, but it raises the question: Do we dare recognise that we might be in the middle of one of these 'rummage sales', or tectonic times of change at this period of history?

- If you sometimes wonder what is happening around you;
- If you sometimes think the church or the world has changed so much that you wonder where you fit in;
- If you find yourself hankering after the securities of the past, or feel like King Canute trying to hold back the tide;
- If you sense that those things that were 'givens' have dissipated and new 'givens' have replaced them surprisingly and suddenly;
- If you wonder where it's all going to end...

It could be that we are in the midst of one of those times, and even drawing towards a 'tipping point', in relation to changes which have their roots in things like the Industrial Revolution,

the two world wars, the development of secularism, modernism and postmodernism, the world becoming a Global Village, multiculturalism, the development of electronic communication and its immediacy, etc., etc..

Changes are all around us, with the uncertainty and disorientation that they bring. Here in Northern Ireland, which is of course tiny in world terms, our present uncertainty is exacerbated by the vacuum created because of our lack of devolved government at present, and the place we find ourselves in in relation to Brexit - and the fact that we don't know who is really engaging with the questions raised, on our behalf. Everything seems to be in flux.

I have listed general societal and western world trends. But I think it is also important to recognise changes in the world of the Church.

I read recently, can't remember in which newspaper (It may or may not be true) that Wittenberg and Geneva (Calvin's city) are now two of the most secular places on the face of the planet. If that were true, it would be shocking. Let me make some statements, which are to a degree subjective, and you can agree or disagree. But they may focus our thinking!

*-Statement 1: The Reformed Tradition in much of the Western World is in a state of severe decline, and potential collapse.*

This was clear to me when visiting a large church building of a Protestant tradition in a Canadian city. The door was open and I went in. It was a large church with beautiful wood and a big gallery, which had clearly been a society church in the past. The wood was still beautiful, but there was an enormous hole in the ceiling. On my way out, I saw an advertisement for (guess what?) a rummage sale in the basement to fix the hole in the ceiling! A few years later, I tried to get in again to see how things had progressed, but there was yellow and black tape across the door saying the building was dangerous. The last time I passed by, there was a large placard saying that the Canadian government's cultural department has restored it, but from what I can see on its website the congregation is tiny!

The western world is littered with closed churches of the reformed tradition. And in countries where there were established churches with roots in the Reformation, there is often a captivity to the spirit of the age, with the church barely distinguishable from the prevailing culture around it. And you all know what Dean Inge said about that! - 'He who marries the spirit of the times will soon find himself a widower'.

*-Statement 2: The denominationalism which grew up in the years since the Reformation is of less and less interest among Christians today.*

In the world I grew up in as a young Christian, there would often be very heated conversations on predestination, infant baptism, forms of church governance, etc. etc. on our street we knew exactly which denomination everyone was, and a person doing a survey could ask at the door, 'What denomination are you?' People usually only transferred denomination when they were either married or converted! There was a pride in the distinctives, which could be both good and bad. But the ecumenical movement of the 20th century led to greater understanding and commonality, and in truth the younger generation today is more interested in finding a place of reality, fellowship, community and teaching, where the presence of God is palpable, than it is in remaining loyal to denominational labels.

*-Statement 3: The third or perhaps even the second 'big player' in the worldwide church, alongside the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodoxy, is now churches held together by the Pentecostal/Charismatic stream.*

The roots of that go back to revival in a place called Azuza Street, in Los Angeles, in 1905, out of which has developed churches with a strong emphasis on the experience of the Holy Spirit, and the gifts of the Spirit. Some of these are in the established churches, but many are independent, or in Pentecostal denominations, or in large worldwide or local networks. No longer are the churches of the Reformation the big player they once were, in terms of the makeup of the worldwide church. And it is probably the case that the gap is widening.

*-Statement 4: The centre of worldwide Christianity has radically moved South.*

Churches in the West are no longer in charge or at the centre of worldwide Christianity, in the way they would rather like to be, and once were. Places like Africa, South America, South East Asia and China are the big players. In these places the number of Christians has grown exponentially, and continues to do so, more than making up for the decline in the North and the West. I remember my good friend Bishop Colin Buchanan saying very controversially and visually about 40 years ago that people from Anglican churches in Africa come back to (let's say) England on a pilgrimage to see mother church, and what they find is an ageing 'toothless grandmother'. I hope Bishop Justin has not found that here, but I also hope he would be honest enough to admit it if he did.

*-Statement 5: People have become cynical about institutions, authority figures, time-consuming structures, and 'establishments' in all churches, Roman Catholic and Protestant.*

A good deal of this cynicism relates to the issues of clerical abuse and the perceived hypocrisy attendant to that. But it is more. It is not just the church which is experiencing cynicism about authority figures. Politicians, especially at the moment in Northern Ireland, are being seen almost as an expensive hobby; doctors and medical people have had their own challenges. Teachers do not have the same implicit trust they would have had at one time, TV and film stars, etc. etc. We need to find ways, and it does not come easily for bishops, of de-institutionalizing the church, in feel as well as reality. Perhaps their informal and relational style and feel is the reason why some of the new church plants in the diocese are getting ownership very quickly and meeting an important need.

### ***Living in this time of Change***

I'm now coming in to land! And I want to finish with a few thoughts about how we are to live as Christians, in a way which is faithful to Christ, at a time of potential tectonic change.

1. *Don't be surprised if you feel disorientated.*

These are disorientating times. If you don't feel disorientated, at least at times, you are probably asleep or living in a world of your own! Disorientation can throw us in dependence on the Lord as our compass, in the way nothing else can.

2. *Remember Rummage Sales can be good!*

I sometimes look around the See House attic, and think, 'Aren't rummage sales a great idea!' When a place is full of unnecessary 'stuff', you spend your time managing the 'stuff', other than

focussing on the key things. It can even give the illusion that we are achieving something! Don't be afraid to challenge the value of what we spend our time doing; don't be afraid to drop what is not important or effective in our church programmes; but don't just challenge the institution, challenge yourself about whether you are living lives with an absolute priority of bearing fruit for the Gospel.

*3. Know what the unchangeable things are - where your authority lies. Hold on to what is good.*

At each of the 500 yearly times of change, the question of authority in matters of faith, and where it is to be found, was vital, and people were prepared to sacrifice even their lives for what was central to the truth of God. People often talk today of 'red lines' which cannot be crossed. Those can be hard to define. But try to be clear about where they are, and be prepared even to suffer for holding on to the truth of Christ, the living Word, revealed in 'God's word written'. The Church of Ireland confesses the truth of the Scriptures, in liturgy, creeds and articles. These really matter. If we have no 'red lines' we should be very concerned indeed!

*4. Don't be afraid to engage in the public square, to understand the culture of the day and to challenge it.*

Just about a week ago, Liz and I did the climb up to the Acropolis in Athens. On one of the days we were there, we had a wonderful guide called Demetris, who took us to Mars Hill, where St Paul made his famous speech to the intelligentsia and cultured people of that city. His speech is an example to all of us, because he is able to start from the philosophers and poets of Athens, and to lead people into the truth of the One God, from their plethora of gods, and especially from the quest summed up in that altar 'to an unknown god'. Some listened, some said they would come back again, but when he spoke of the resurrection, they sneered at him. However, one or two believed, including St Dionysius, and, as our Greek Orthodox guide commented, 'St Paul did a great job. We're all Christians now!'. Engagement in the public square requires intelligence, understanding of culture and a thick skin that doesn't mind being challenged and even laughed at, but it is vital, and we aren't very good at it!

*5. Trust in the sovereignty of God.*

God remains sovereign in the midst of change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever. Phyllis Tickle points out the degree to which the 'rummage sale' periods, or the tectonic change periods actually re-energise the church. At the Reformation 500 years ago, both the reformers and the counter-reformers were re-energised. These are times when we are thrown on the mercy of a God who has always remained faithful to his people, even when they have been unfaithful to him. His church may come through a time like this in a very different form, but in the midst of it all, the Lord is making his Bride, blemished and human, into the Bride which will be presented to him perfect at the last day. Things may never be quite the same again, but God is gathering all who bow the knee to Christ, and, even in their brokenness and frailty, his eternal purposes are being fulfilled. Tectonic shifts are times to depend on God and God alone, whose Son Jesus Christ loved the church so much that he laid his life down for her.

It is in that utter assurance of faith that we gather in this synod today.