

Down and Dromore Diocesan Synod

14 June 2018

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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One of the parts of the Book of Common Prayer rarely used today is to be found sandwiched between the Catechism and the Articles of Religion. It is 'The Creed of Saint Athanasius', and is placed among the teaching documents at the end of the book. Article 8 of the 39 Articles gives us some teaching specifically about the creeds, and says:

The three creeds, the Nicene Creed, Athanasius' Creed and that which is commonly called the Apostles' Creed, ought thoroughly to be received and believed, for they may be proved by the most certain warrants of holy scripture.

I understand that this parish church, in the days of redoubtable Dean Roland Hutchinson, used the Athanasian Creed each Trinity Sunday (as the 1662 Book of Common Prayer required). But it does not resonate easily with modern ears. Indeed, I considered using it at the Communion Service today, but could not quite bring myself to do so! The Athanasian Creed was not actually written by St Athanasius, but undoubtedly contains some of the key teaching and 'mood music' of Athanasius who almost single-handedly rescued the church from going down a road into error in the fourth century. I am told that, on his gravestone the inscription reads 'Athanasius -Contra Mundum' (against the world!). And he was literally known as 'Athanasius Contra Mundum'.

And that raises the question which is to be my starting point for this my 22nd Presidential Address as your bishop: 'What should the relationship be between the church and the world?' Athanasius lived in the fourth century, when the Roman Empire had, through Constantine, embraced the Christian faith as the faith of the state. Christendom had begun. It was also in that century that creeds were formulated. That was a very different scenario from the first three centuries when Christians had been largely persecuted for holding the faith. However, in this new context, there were other battles to be fought, as the church was embraced by the world. These related to the true doctrine to be taught about God as Holy Trinity and the nature of Jesus Christ as the Son of God. In that world, a man called Arius had gained ground with false teaching denying the deity of Christ and false teaching about the Trinity (the roots of Unitarianism). This teaching was being widely received and accepted, not least by members of the church, and into that world stepped Athanasius, as 'wee Johnny who was out of step' with the others, but who in fact, proved to be the teacher and preserver of the truth. In the end, his teaching became the teaching of the church, so that we still find his blessed name in the creeds of the church and in our Book of Common Prayer.

Liz and I have just returned from the Albany Convention, from a diocese which in many ways is out of step with the prevailing mood of the Episcopal Church in the States. Last Sunday morning I was invited to preach to the Convention on a strange little passage from Luke 12, which just happened to be the reading of that day in the lectionary. It began with the words of verse 32:

'Fear not, little flock, for it is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom'.

It is not always the majority which is right, indeed, it is not normally the majority which is right in terms of Christian faith. Wee Johnny out of step, like Athanasius, can be a very important person when history is written up in the future.

So, our starting point in relation to the Church and the world is quite simply this: believers in the truth of the Gospel will be in the minority rather than the majority. We are, in my view, increasingly in a Western world where orthodox Christian faith will be, like Athanasius, 'contra mundum'. That is a challenge not only to Anglicans, but in fact to all the major churches which emerged from the Reformation, because, although we in the reformed tradition started as eccentrics, we quickly became used to being part of official state religion, to being respected in the societies in which we function, to being part of the established flow, and we now have to decide how to respond, believe and live in an entirely new kind of world and context.

The truth of this reality has become very apparent in the island of Ireland and even more clearly, as it relates to the Roman Catholic Church. I don't think anyone would deny that we have moved, incredibly speedily, from an Ireland in which the Roman Catholic Church 'called the shots' and was largely in control, to an Ireland where the Roman Catholic Church has been told in no uncertain terms in two referenda in the Republic, that they are no longer going to tell people how to live their lives.

If we take the recent Referendum on Section 8 of the Constitution as an example, the Roman Catholic Church's position on abortion is quite clear and well known, but what is also clear is that the populous was no longer going to be told what to do by a church which many considered to have been controlling and dominant, and even hypocritical. The extent and speed of the change has been literally phenomenal. The influence of the Catholic Church on people's thinking has almost completely gone. We in Northern Ireland are living in the wake of that and of more liberal thinking in the UK. That was seen in the Assembly (when it was in place), where, even after a restatement by the catholic bishops of a catholic understanding of marriage, not one catholic assembly member voted against same-sex marriage in the recent debates. It is not surprising, therefore that Diarmuid Martin, the Roman Catholic archbishop of Dublin said, just this week, that Pope Francis will visit a 'very different Ireland' this summer, 'as the catholic Church in Ireland struggles to find a new place in Irish society and culture'.

Lest you in any way perceive this address as being anti-catholic (which is certainly not my style or position), we need to recognise that what is happening is not just about one expression of Western institutional Christianity, but probably about all expressions. In Northern Ireland, we as members of the Church of Ireland, were used to our own implicit sense of being a protestant province for a protestant people, upheld by the Unionist establishment, with the C of I being the hangover of the 'auld establishment', holding the historic church sites and buildings, and being the default church for State occasions. Practically all of that is now gone, but we retain our natural Reformation default position, which is Erastianism, meaning that we generally go along with changes in the state - moral, political and cultural - even if we resist them at first.

With that preamble, the question is this: What are we called to do to be faithful to Jesus Christ in the world of this generation, in this particular place and at this particular time?

The New Testament has a great deal to say about the relationship of the believer to the world. For example, St Paul in Romans 12:2:

'Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect',

Or the high-priestly prayer of Jesus, prayed on the night before he died. It lets us in to what is on the heart of Jesus for his followers, which resonates with the heart of the Father. John 17:9:

I am not asking on behalf of the world, but on behalf of those whom you gave me, because they are yours.....I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, protect them in your name.....I have given them your word,

and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world.....’

What is absolutely clear here is that Christians are called to be ‘in the world’, and indeed, a blessing to the world, but not ‘of the world’. In fact, if we become simply ‘of the world’, we will lose our very ministry and purpose, just as salt would be useless in flavouring food if it lost its distinctiveness. And, the way we avoid tipping over into being ‘of the world’ is by being made holy and different by the word of truth. This doesn’t only apply to a few ‘hot-button issues’ like euthanasia, abortion and sexuality, but it applies to the whole way in which we live our lives as disciples of Christ.

So, for a few moments, let’s reflect first of all on what it means to be ‘in the world’.

It means that we are not separatist or overly-pietistic. It means we happily live out our lives in the context of the everyday, carrying with us, and sharing with others, the presence and message of Christ. It may be the world of our neighbourhood or our home, the world of work or business, school or college. The basic place of witness for Christian believers is ‘out there’. That means that we need to raise up disciples who will enter into the political and social life of our community, who will argue the faith in the marketplace, and who will enter into worlds like journalism, the media, schools, healthcare, ecology, industry, trade and business, and who will live palpably for Christ in all those contexts, witnessing with fellow-believers from other churches as well. We are ‘in the world’. And all of this is lived out in the love of Christ for our fellow human beings as the driving force of Christian faith, without which we become a ‘noisy gong or a clanging cymbal’.

It also means that, if we are ‘in the world’, we will engage with the world as we worship. I have noticed an increasing trend in church congregations of all types and styles, to play down, and even largely forget about intercession for the things of God’s world. Sometimes I try to excuse it, by convincing myself that churches have prayer meetings in which there is passionate, focussed and engaged intercession for the realities out there, but actually I don’t think I believe my own propaganda! I think the truth is that we don’t realise the importance of our intercession for God’s world. When was the last time you heard really intentional prayer for our political impasse here in Northern Ireland, about Brexit, for the Assembly to be up and running again, for the first and deputy first minister, for MPs, local councillors etc etc. St Paul says in 1 Timothy 2:

First of all, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercession and thanksgivings be made for everyone, for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.

The other way we are learning to be in the world is a real rediscovery of Anglican ethos: the fact that we are here to serve parishes, not gathered churches. The Anglican system, at least in Ireland, is a parish system. There are churches in every geographical location, and indeed, we are seeking to ensure that there are churches even closer in some places, with the planting of what are often called ‘community churches’. Sometimes I notice a misuse of the word ‘parish’ as though it means ‘church’. A church is not a parish. A church exists in a parish and it exists to serve that place and the needs of that community.

There are many wonderful examples throughout the diocese: Via Wings, meeting the needs of vulnerable families and children in Dromore, which emerged in its infancy out of Dromore Cathedral; three Christians Against Poverty Debt Centres and several other CAP ministries in the diocese. Our churches contribute to foodbanks and others give out hampers at Christmas. We have

youth projects such as JIMS in Kilkeel, The Logic Youth ministry in Moira and The Red Door here in Magheralin. And several community associations; 7 months ago Willowfield Parish Community Association opened a gym with a vision to engage more with the local community and to give them the benefits of a fitness facility. We also have the continuing work of the Dock Cafe in Titanic Quarter, which remains at the top or near the top of the Trip Advisor list of cafes in Belfast. I want to publicly thank Chris Bennett for his work over nearly a decade in the Titanic Quarter. Chris and Susan are taking a year out to travel Europe, and we wish them God's blessing. The work of the Dock continues under the new café manager, Stephen McIlwaine.

I observe that, when churches discover the needs, issues, people and places of their parish, and find their centre of gravity outside themselves, they become energised, creative and even vibrant with growth.

But I also see at times, a real resistance to change, and a settledness in some places with the idea that we are intended to be self-serving, here for our own needs and own good. No. We are to be 'in the world'!

It just happens that this year's Diocesan Synod is in this particular parish, and the parish of Magheralin offers us several examples of how the church can serve the world, even beyond the parish boundaries. Every one of them, by the way, was the initiative of one or two people.

First, 'Fields of Life', which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year and has grown into a very large operation. 'Fields of Life' was born in this parish, through the Revd Trevor Stevenson, who was curate at the time. The charity has built and developed more than a hundred schools, mostly in Uganda, but is also now working in places like South Sudan, indeed, in Maridi Diocese.

Secondly, 'Love for Life', developed by the vision of Dickie and Janice Barr, from this parish. 'Love for Life' describes itself as 'an independent Christian charity, working to equip young people with the knowledge, skills and values necessary to make good choices when it comes to relationships and sex. It now delivers programmes in almost 70% of post-primary schools in Northern Ireland, and it is certainly both needed and a great blessing.

Thirdly, 'Charlene's Project', started by the Barr's daughter, Charlene, who died at the age of 20 from cystic fibrosis, but instead of thinking about herself, determined to build one of those schools in Uganda. The project is now also working among the disadvantaged of Guatemala.

Fourthly, 'Madlug', with its strapline, 'Helping children in care carry their lives with dignity'. 'Madlug' was founded only in 2015 by Dave Linton, who was the youth worker here. He started it with only £480, with the 'buy one give one' approach. For every piece of luggage you buy, a child in care is given a piece of luggage, so that they do not have the indignity of carrying their often few possessions in a black bin bag.

And finally, all of us know of that other very important aspect of engagement with the world, as we are called to care for God's creation, because we are regularly reminded of it by Stephen Trew, and no doubt Stephen was one of the guiding hands in making this year our first 'sustainable Synod'.

The church is in the world, because we all live in the world, it is in the world when it intentionally prioritises those outside of itself, and it is in the world to proclaim the Gospel of the grace of Jesus Christ, and to bring others into a living relationship with him, the very expression of God so loving the world.

But, the second angle is also important, though it may sometimes appear negative. The follower of Jesus is not 'of the world'. The community of faith is not 'of the world'. Now, what exactly might that mean? In the days when I first became a follower of Christ, there was a wee inclination in believers to almost create 'distinctives' which set Christians apart. No smoking, no drinking, no pictures, no ice cream on Sundays, no make-up, no dancing...and the list might go on! These things almost became a way of establishing the self-righteousness of those who were, in the common parlance of the day, 'good living'. Other sins, like selfishness, greed, sectarianism, gossip, lack of love, spiritual pride, and a whole load more, were relatively unnoticed in comparison.

But the real meaning of not being 'of the world' is that we are people who have different priorities and different values, who are not moulded by the presuppositions of the world around us. We will think about money in a different way, knowing it to be a gift of God to be used for the good of all, not for our own good, and enjoying the gladness of tithing and generosity; we will see others as beloved creations of God, who are made in his own image with inestimable value and worth, no matter how broken or different they may be; we will seek out and serve the most lost of the lost and the most hopeless of the hopeless; we will exercise hospitality, knowing that in so doing we will sometimes entertain angels unawares; we will forgive the unforgivable and be prepared to lay down our own desires and preferences for the sake of the values of the Kingdom of God. That is what people want to see in churches. The institution is only there to provide a framework for that to happen.

That kind of Gospel-living is hard. It is hard to find, and hard to do. But when we see it, it is liberating, joyful and energising.

Jasper Rutherford was involved with some Barna research recently in the Republic of Ireland, and one of the things young people - from both Christian and non-Christian backgrounds - were asked to do was to put down which words they would use to describe the church. It was very telling. Most practising Christians saw Christianity as being loving towards everyone, kind, good for the world etc etc. For those who did not claim to be Christians, only 12% thought it was loving towards everyone, only 16% thought it was kind, and only 9% thought it was good for the world. Higher percentages saw it as judgmental, elderly and 'just like everyone else'. Indeed, even among Christians, many thought we were 'just like everyone else', and even more practising Christians than unbelievers thought we were elderly! There is a job of work to be done in this generation.

So, to finish. We are in the world but not of it. In Latin *pro Mundum* and *contra Mundum* at one and the same time. That is the genius of the Christian faith. To be distinct but involved, the same but different, and when we carry that role in the name of Christ, the blessings both to the world and us will be unimaginable. Blessings from the God who can do far more than we can ask, think or even imagine!