

First of all, may I thank very warmly Archbishop Michael and the Dean for the kind invitation to preach here on this occasion. It is an invitation indeed for which I am most grateful, but one that carries with it a sort of hospital pass, because to preach at a service commemorating the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland when we're in the middle of a British General Election campaign carries the possibility of being misunderstood and the certainty of being politically misinterpreted. Moreover, the irony of the Primate of the established church preaching on this occasion hardly needs emphasising.

The Church of Ireland has always been, and continues to be, a profound gift not only to Ireland, but to the Church universal including the wider Anglican Communion. It is a bridge church. It bridges the two parts of this island. It has made a wonderful bridge with the Methodists. It has bridged across the gaps in the life of the Anglican Communion. It is a church of reconciliation and courage. Its history is one of regeneration, of resilience, and it has led the way in many respects, including the ordination of women.

In 1870, a convention issued a Constitution in response to the disestablishment of the Church, part of which, as you all know, read 'The Church of Ireland will maintain communion with the sister Church of England, and with all other Christian churches agreeing in the principles of this Declaration; and will set forward, so far as in it lieth, quietness, peace, and love among all Christian people'. In many ways that hope, and prayer has been fulfilled as has the statement that disestablishment would enable the Church of Ireland to be freed to set its own course. I thank God for the Church of Ireland, for its continued friendship, for its tradition of spreading that quietness, peace and love which continues today. Continues in a global church where it is more and more necessary.

But then I read today's texts. Thank you so much to the compilers of the lectionary. Reading and reflecting on these passages, the grim judgement of Jeremiah, including that the ruler of Israel would be buried like a donkey and hanged out beyond the gates of Jerusalem and that the rich would be destroyed and Jerusalem emptied. Then the passage about children in Luke's gospel. Once I got over the shock, I was left with two themes. The first is the issue of power and authority and the second is a question: to whom is given the Kingdom of Heaven and why?

The text in Jeremiah is difficult to stomach. It reminds us forcefully in the most vivid terms of the inevitability of God's judgement. It reminds us that everyone is accountable to God – and all the more so if they are in positions of power and influence. Power is exhibited by grand cathedrals, great titles and access – cedar houses in wealthy Lebanon.

Yet if we look at the beginning of the chapter in Jeremiah, we see why God's wrath has been kindled. It is the duty, we read, of those in power, those with access and privilege, to 'do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place'. God's concern is always and everywhere for those with no protection and those who are in a position to care for others and yet choose not to by act or omission, face judgement.

When we face judgement we may be forced in the light of God's unblinking gaze to accept that we choose not to do good. Or for many of us, and I look around at Archbishops, Bishops and clergy, we will say "But I was attending committees. We organised good things. I'm sure someone was doing this, I was too busy keeping your church going." And the question will come back, "going for what. And for who?"

God reminds us of the vulnerability of temporal security, of keeping things going. I've always remembered that in 1974 the Protestant churches in South Vietnam, at the beginning of the year, met to set up their ten year plan. Six months later, South Vietnam was defeated and obliterated. God reminds us constantly of temporal security of complacency and reliance on earthly riches. Perhaps in some precious way the Church of Ireland was liberated from that in its disestablishment.

God does not look for these outward displays of power and wealth, and He warns us that we shall find no security in them if our hearts are not turned towards Him. For God is interested not in palaces, but in justice. God looks not for wealth, but righteousness. God cares not for privilege, but he looks for us all to be so full of His grace that it overflows abundantly in service to others.

We also see that God is deeply rooted in and concerned for the politics of the day. Do not accept, do not teach and do not believe the lie that the church has nothing to do with politics. For politics is the science of how we live together and if we have nothing to do with that let's tear out two thirds of the New Testament. Let's get rid of the Beatitudes. Let's get rid of that stuff in the Old Testament about the orphan and the widow. That's his call to us.

We sang the Magnificat, we can forget that: he'll cast down the mighty from their thrones and lift up the humble and meek. The East India company before 1856 banned the singing of the magnificat in evensong because it didn't want the wrong people to get the idea about casting down the mighty from their thrones. It was an English company.

We cannot avoid the reality of the context in which we live politically, but we can live in it as those who are called to follow a different path; one not of competition and exclusion, but of love and welcome. One hundred and fifty years ago an Irish Church which, like the English one, relied on power, on heritage and on influence and access, found itself to some extent and progressively removed from these, a removal that became greater as time went by, especially after the independence of the Republic of Ireland.

More than that, it was challenged by a civil war in the 1920s, terrorism of various sorts and then the long period, the Troubles, that changed so dramatically in 1998. For it is a church for which the border really does not exist. As no borders exist in the mind of God.

Today the Church of Ireland is challenged to be the prophetic voice of God in a time when the side effects of Brexit will produce unforeseeable consequences. (I am not being political here it is simply a fact that consequences are unforeseeable. I am taking my cue from that well known saying, from Marx, Groucho of course, about never making predictions, and especially not about the future).

We do not qualify to belong to God's people through our own efforts. But we are called, and in being called we are to live as those who belong to God. Stanley Hauerwas, in one of my favourite quotes, says "The church must always live in a way that makes no sense if God does not exist." The people of Israel, at the time of Jeremiah, were acting in a way that led them towards separation from God. They were not trusting in faith. They relied on power, on position and on heritage.

We are reminded in this passage that that which can seem so secure, that power and position and heritage, is in the hands of God. Earthly systems are swept away. And God endures. Bloodlines end and new systems begin. And God endures. The future, and indeed the present, looks nothing like people expected or thought they wanted. And God endures over all,

reigning with justice and righteousness in ways we so often do not understand at the time, wrapped up as we are in our earthly concerns.

We so often miss the point of power and authority. And so God sends us Jesus Christ to show that true kingship isn't found in King Herod. It is found in the defenceless babe whom he persecutes. True authority is not found with the High Priests or Archbishops. It's with the carpenter who surrounds himself with a rag-tag bunch of friends. And true power is not found with Pontius Pilate, but rather in the man who is crucified by him and broken on the cross, He who suffers and dies for us. Because He is the only one who defeats death and offers us in the resurrection eternal life with God.

So we ask ourselves, as we face the reality of judgement and the call to live as those whose life makes no sense without God, to whom then is the Kingdom of God given? We are offered a contrast to the wealthy king dragged like a donkey through the gate of Jerusalem in today's passage from Luke. We see the powerful king in contrast with children, who have no power or influence but to whom the Kingdom of God belongs.

It was Jonathan Swift, from this very Cathedral, who warned 'don't set your wit against a child'. I'm sure that many of us have had the experience of being totally disarmed by the uncomplicated honesty and truth of a child who neither knows nor cares about the things that can seem so important as an adult. Jesus welcomed the little children, and encouraged us to be more like them, because he knows that in their innocence, their trust and lack of concern for material wealth and power they do not base their identity on their social status or access, but on knowing that they are loved. And this is why in the Church of England when we have failed to love and worse, when we have abused, we are so like the oppressors.

For our identity is found through Love. It is found supremely in Jesus Christ alone. Who knows who we are, who knows the very depths of our being, who looks into each of us and says I know you by name and I call you by name, you are mine. And seeks for us to say in you we find the truth not only about God but about ourselves.

So, what are we left with? In Jeremiah, we hear that we are accountable, not just to one another, but to God. In Luke, we hear that Christ does not care for the many riches and accoutrements we acquire as we grow up – He wants us as we are, childlike and trusting. The authority of the Church of Ireland is not found in establishment or disestablishment, it is in serving and spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. Power is in the children whom Jesus welcomes to the Kingdom, in the foreigner and the fatherless, the widow and the innocent whom kings are tasked to protect in Jeremiah.

Today I saw in a church here in Dublin, a church deeply committed to those who are the foreigner and the fatherless, the widow and the innocent. And there you saw authentic church. Christ's church is, and will always be the church for all, no matter where and who we are in our societies.

We are called, therefore, not to fear but to proclaim. To speak for righteousness and truth and in our sinfulness not to point to ourselves but to point to Jesus Christ. The Church that does that, as has been found on this island, is one that may go through many periods of upheaval, yet can be at peace with itself in the knowledge that God reigns over all and loves each of us as we are. It sets an example to others and continues in its pilgrimage, a pilgrimage for which I am deeply grateful, in a way that those who held office one hundred and fifty years ago would have been hard put to imagine.

Today one of the most special moments was to meet Archbishop Diarmuid Martin and to find not just a wonderful man of God whose courage and leadership is known well beyond these shores, but a friend of Archbishop Michael and to see in that friendship the true sign of the Irish Church. I leave you today with a final quote from St Patrick, who spoke thus of the Irish people: ‘they have become the people of the Lord, and are called children of God’.

Amen.

(2132 words)