

GENERAL SYNOD 2009

**GENERAL SYNOD SERVICE IN
ST PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL ARMAGH
ON SUNDAY, 10 MAY 2009**

**SERMON PREACHED BY THE RIGHT REVEREND TREVOR WILLIAMS,
BISHOP OF THE UNITED DIOCESES OF LIMERICK, ARDFERT, AGHADOE,
KILLALOE, KILFENORA, CLONFERT, KILMACDUAGH AND EMLY**

EMBARGOED UNTIL 11.00A.M. ON SUNDAY, 10 MAY 2009

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I John 4.21 "The commandment we have from Jesus is this. Those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also"

There are effective ways of building a strong community. If you believe that Hitler's troops, or communist forces, or the other sort from down the road are about to invade your area and destroy your community, you will have no trouble recruiting Dad's army or whoever else you may need to protect the homeland. Fear of the enemy can build community; Marking out who belongs to 'us' and who belongs to 'them'. We know this, on both sides of the border.

But the Christian community is a complete contrast. It is not formed by fear of the other, or limited by the boundaries between 'us' and 'them' it is defined by the person of Jesus: moulded by his character and motivated by his love. So Jesus speaks to us in today's Gospel and says "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." When our wishes are framed by the person of Jesus, our Church will fulfil it's purpose.

During the past three years of the Hard Gospel Project we have been learning what kind of Church God wants us to be. Loving God, and our neighbour as ourselves.

But it's the way Jesus understands the word neighbour that is so scandalous.

The perfect neighbour in Jesus' story is not the Jewish priest, or the pious Levite, it was a hated and heretical Samaritan. And the Samaritans act of kindness to a Jew would not have been appreciated by his own community. Being a Jew was to hate the Samaritans, and visa versa. Jesus, in calling us to abide in his words, to love our neighbour as ourselves, is saying that the Christian community is not defined by hatred or fear or rivalry of the other, it is defined by indiscriminate deeds of kindness, which includes loving the unlovely, crossing social boundaries, breaking taboos of acceptability; being scandalous in our love for those who do not belong to us.

We have had three years of a Hard Gospel Project. I believe it has pointed us towards the heart of our calling as Church. We could have an efficient Church, successfully organised and well run.

But if we don't love our enemies as Jesus told us, his words are not abiding in us. And like a branch, if it is unconnected to vine, it will be no more than a withered twig.

The Hard Gospel project has brought this message home to us. The question now is, are we going to respond to this call from Christ. Are his words going to abide in us, are we going to align our Church structures, our parish programmes, our personal discipleship around the words of Jesus, Loving God and our neighbour as ourself.

Are we going to live the Hard Gospel? This is our task for the years ahead.