

General Synod Presidential Address 2024

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Although this is the fifth Presidential Address I have had the privilege of delivering since my election as Primate, it is the first time I have been able to do so in Armagh. That I am able to do so now is a particular delight to me as I know that this city holds a very special place in the hearts of many people in the Church of Ireland. For many of us Armagh is a city of hope and of reconciliation and I particularly want to thank my brother in Christ and in Primatial ministry, Archbishop Eamon Martin, for the hospitality he has shown me since I came to live here and for the partnership in the Gospel which we enjoy. Archbishop Eamon hopes to be with us here in the Synod Hall for a time tomorrow and I know he will be warmly received by all of us who admire the way he has helped model reconciliation as a central aspect of his intensely busy ministry.

In my first Presidential Address in 2020 I highlighted the theme of reconciliation and committed myself to a path of reconciliation – between communities, between these islands, between ethnic groups, between ourselves and the earth that we live in, and also within the Church of Ireland. I remain committed to that path, which has taken and will take different forms in different contexts. Reconciliation in the religious sense is a gift given to us by God in his Son, but it also a vocation - indeed a struggle - to engage in, as we work out patiently and sometimes painfully what it means in every aspect of our lives: our personal lives, our lives in our communities and our life in the world.

We do not live in a world that has the appearance of being reconciled and at peace in any sense. There are many parts of the globe, as we sit here today, where people experience life as a perpetual night; a black darkness even at the midday. I need hardly name such places – Yemen, Ukraine, Israel, Gaza, Sudan, South Sudan and many more. The commentators have allowed each one to slip from the headlines as a new conflict appears. We have no such option, as each should remain in our prayers and in our practical response. Not to give up once we have committed ourselves to some place or some body is truly Christian.

In previous Presidential Addresses, I have been happy to leave the business of the General Synod – our bills and resolutions and discussions – to the members of the General Synod and to those who will ably propose and second and speak to matters as they arise. I will do that again this year.

That leaves me free to say something about how we in the Church of Ireland might be present in today's world and also to say something about our self-understanding – what we believe ourselves to be and how we exercise such moral authority as we have, in the name of Jesus Christ. Other Churches have other ways of living out their vocation as disciples of Jesus Christ, each way formed by providence through the processes of history. I make absolutely no claim that how we do so is the best way-merely that it is *our* way. It is the little offering which we bring into the treasury of the wider Catholic Church.

I want now to offer an outline of *the particular manner* in which I believe we should make our contribution to the ordinary life of the places where we witness, remembering that we live in a pluralist society and no longer seek to have either the first word or the last word, but hopefully we still have *a* word – and a distinctive word – to say in many areas of life.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, the principal questions which I need to ask myself at any time are: “how will what I do or say express my discipleship of Jesus Christ?” and “how will it contribute to the common good?” That is especially important for local or national Church Leaders and is crucial when we contribute to public debate.

Church Leaders are not party-political figures, nor are we the accredited representatives of any political community – and I cannot say plainly enough, *we should not be so*. Fortunately there are a large number of elected representatives from political communities who are able to speak and lead in that sense.

As a Church Leader I do not speak *for, with, or to* the Church, or to broader society in relation to political community. In many ways, the political or constitutional affiliation of Church of Ireland people is none of my business. An alignment of denominational and political affiliation has been too significant a feature of the history of this island, and has only succeeded in making many in society suspicious of where the Church’s conclusive loyalty really lies. It has impeded the Church’s usefulness in the world and has at times also cheapened the Gospel and its implications.

The God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Sovereign Lord of all peoples, a God of justice and mercy, who desires the good of all. For those of us whose Churches are organised on an all-island basis, this is especially important to remember. We who are called by his Name must behave according to His character.

Our guide in how we should follow our vocation – as individuals, as parishes and as a General Synod – is clear enough. We use these words in our Eucharistic liturgy, so they should also be familiar enough. They are these:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul and all your strength, and your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

These few words are a summary of the whole revelation of the nature of God and of our response to that revelation. And the way we are called to respond is known as the law of love.

So, what do I mean by the law of love? And why do I believe it applies (including the claim of self-sacrifice) to groups as well as to individuals? Just to be clear, love in this sense is not a vague warm feeling nor intense romantic passion. Love is our goodwill and benevolence towards our neighbours. Love is what binds people together against hatred and dishonesty. It is powerful; it requires courage.

The law of love is the expression of the nature of God, therefore universal in scope but *applying in different ways to individuals and to groups in society*. For this reason, we need to discern and to differentiate *which* way we are dealing with, otherwise the claims of love will be applied irrelevantly and ineffectively.

To put it another way, the demand to love God calls for absolute surrender (“you shall love the Lord your God with *all* your...”). But the love of our neighbour is relative and limited; we are to love them *as ourselves*. In no case in civic life are we to prefer our neighbour’s interests to our own; we are required to put them on a level. For a community which includes ourselves and

our neighbour, both may be required to temper their own or their group's interest in the cause of the common good. Wider loyalties should act as a check on narrower ones.

Therefore, in terms of civic life the way of love lies not through altruism, but through reasonable claim and just award; in short, through justice. *Within the Church*, between its members, the true measure and expression of love is *forgiveness*. *Among the groups which make up a society* the true form and expression of love is *justice*. So long as society is organised in groups with diverging interests, so love must express itself first in justice.

Perhaps it is worthwhile reflecting on the common interests of church and society, or where these concerns overlap: that is, in the area of citizenship. Of what it means to be a good citizen. What are the distinguishing characteristics of a citizen in the modern world? It has been pointed out that in the ancient world, the world, say, of the New Testament, the answer was obvious enough. A citizen was someone who was not a slave. He or she was someone whose choices and identity weren't owned by someone else.

Or as the lawyers today would say: someone who had the liberty to dispose of his or her own acts. Just like a citizen in the ancient world, a modern citizen is someone who has a voice in the community, who has certain legal protections and who has a significant say in the choices of their own life. So the citizen has the personal dignity of making a contribution to the community or society where they live - in the vision shared by the community. To be a citizen is to be responsible for maintaining your personal and social environment – which of course entails relationships to others. Citizenship means a voice guaranteed a hearing and a person protected by law.

The idea of citizenship was very important in the early days of Christianity. The Greek word (*ekklesia*) which we translate as 'church' was the word used in the ancient world for an assembly of citizens. The Church didn't make up a new word for what they understood themselves to be when they gathered for worship or for debate; they simply used the familiar word that meant a gathering of citizens – of people who were guaranteed a voice and guaranteed responsibility.

From the very start, the Church said to its members that, 'regardless of the political arrangements around you, there is another place in which you have non-negotiable rights and a gift to share, a place where you have the dignity of being a decision maker and being able to contribute to where you live'. The Church – *ekklesia*. All of this had consequences for the wider communities that church members, like you and I, are part of. It still does.

Christianity is not an opting-out of political or social life and conversation. It does not aim to remove people from civic responsibility; on the contrary, it is the place where the deepest kind of civic responsibility is nurtured and carried out into the world. And what is the deepest kind of civic responsibility? To love your neighbour as yourself.

Part of the purpose of Christian community is to learn to treat people – every person – as capable of civic dignity and freedom; as individuals capable of contributing to their nearer and wider social and political environment by *free decision taken in consultation*. From that point of view, the citizen assemblies which we call 'the Church' are places where we argue and debate about what we understand is good for the whole of society.

Imperfect as our means of putting these ideals into institutional or procedural form may be, that is how we conduct our business and exercise our teaching authority, both within the Church and in the world. When we are faced with any complex moral or theological matter, we first ask ourselves should we speak or act about this matter at all? And if we do feel that we have something to contribute to the issue, our method is to refer it to a group made up of clergy and lay people, of wide-ranging opinions, from different parts of this island, of different sexes and identities, so that the matter can be studied and prayed about and debated. All this is to ensure that what we will say is indeed free decision taken in consultation, and after careful thought and prayer.

The cohesion and unity of the Church of Ireland since Disestablishment has only been achieved through this continual, patient wrestling over time with complex issues, avoiding simplistic answers to difficult questions. And in that wrestling with issues we must above all respect the dignity of each individual. That is how we proceeded on issues which may look plain enough in retrospect - issues like the ordination of women or the re-marriage of divorced people in church. We took our time and arrived at a what we believed to be an outcome that was faithful to Scripture and to tradition, and which could be reasonably argued and presented, and received by the Church. In other areas, despite years of deliberation – such as on Communion for children – we were unable to reach a consensus and we let the matter rest.

Christian citizenship, both in the *ekklesia* and in the world, is about people of flesh and blood and the realities of their lives. In his *City of God*, St Augustine outlines two kinds of human belonging-together and two kinds of love. Do we live by bearing one another's burdens? Or do we live at one another's expense? Those are the two great human options. If you go, however slowly or fitfully, for the first option you are helping to build up the City of God. If you live by any other principle, it isn't just that you are going for second best, but you are really opting for a form of chaos, and the best you can hope for or achieve is randomly-controlled selfishness.

Indeed, what we have learned in our *ekklesia* should provide us with the antennae to detect when we ourselves, or any spokespeople in the public realm, are using language that demeans or diminishes human beings. We should be able to scent when they are telling lies about what human beings (and indeed God) are actually like. So when politics is dominated by creating fear and scapegoats, those antennae should spring into action. Because fear and division-generating politics is not mature political discourse. It's not real politics. It is playing with paranoia, which is the dangerous opposite of serving the community and building the community with a spirit of love.

And those antennae, developed in our parishes and councils, are more important now than ever. The contemporary world faces a range of challenges which in number and in intensity is probably unique. Thanks to the scale and nature of media sources these days, there is a much greater consciousness than ever before of those difficulties and challenges.

Playing with paranoia in such conditions is currently the domain of populists of both left and right. But it is all too easy for élites and wider 'respectable' society to become infected by it. Many interests can become vested in maintaining division rather than in building community. It has been the mark of statesmen and women in history to identify problems and injustices and to solve them. It has become the mark of many in public life today to identify injustices and problems and to exploit them.

Populist politicians, activists and commentators address and exploit the vast complexity and unprecedented scale of the challenges we face, not with policies but with slogans. Slogans such as ‘Ireland is full’. Well, Ireland is not full. Ireland, North and South, has been right to welcome migrants and asylum seekers. In one sense, such incomers made Ireland catholic – as in universal and diverse – in a way we hadn’t been before.

Perhaps not enough thought was given to how to integrate those newcomers and their needs into society, and what that means for social and physical infrastructure. That oversight does not excuse us from our responsibility to seek justice for our neighbour. Political failures cannot disapply the law of love. If the well-being of our neighbour (wherever they may have come from) is becoming more precarious, then we are called through the law of love to work even harder for justice.

We are at an important moment not just in Irish or British history, but in world history. Is it to be a moment of breakdown or a moment of breakthrough? Neither breakdown or breakthrough are instantaneous or surprise events. They are always carried in the womb of history and are the product of conscious choices. History is not simply something which must be understood and endured. History is the process whereby we can make our world more humane and more just.

It is a process which, through conscientious decisions, can produce an “us” that doesn’t currently exist, but is latent in that womb. We can choose to be a people who are deeply involved in the nature of God and of one another, and who for that reason, abhor the threats of a malevolent fanaticism, whose only contribution to community life is hatred, bitterness and division. If we are deeply involved in the nature of God, how different our contribution to community life should be - in accordance with the law of love.

We are at a point in the history of the world when many things will change. Many things need to change. Many of our own darlings may disappear without trace. It may be we can preserve nothing *but our values*, through which, as the Bishop of Clogher said in his sermon earlier this morning, we “use our patience, skills, and loving care to help any who come near the church door. And the impact we may have to bring hope and healing is immeasurable through the grace of God”.

The question I want to conclude with is this: Given all that I have said about this hinge point in history and the moral seriousness of the hour, to which we are called to respond: who can carry this moment alone?

No-one can.

But we are not called to carry it alone.

As we approach Pentecost, where the gift of the Holy Spirit was given “when they were all together in one place” – as the whole of the Church of Ireland is in some sense today – let us draw on the resources we have been given:

All the promises of God and all the words of the prophets. The apostolic witness and the glory of the gospel, which has only reconciliation and life in it and nothing of division and death. The virtue and wisdom of the Irish saints – of Patrick and Columba and Brigid – and the mists of sorrow and struggle through which they passed.

And we have each other.

God has not called us to be his voice and his compassion in the world and then left us bereft.

Exactly a week ago, during our four-day meeting in Rome, the Primates of the Anglican Communion had an hour-long audience with Pope Francis in the Vatican. In the course of his short address, the Pope spoke about the Primacy of the Holy Spirit and went on to say:

“We are called to pray and to listen to one another, seeking to understand each other’s concerns and asking ourselves, before enquiring of others, whether we have been receptive to the Spirit’s promptings or prey to our own personal or party opinions...God’s way leads us to cling more fervently to the Lord Jesus, for only in communion with him will we find full communion with one another.”

He was referring of course to ecumenical dialogue, but I hope his wise words find a welcome at the start of this General Synod.

May we find full communion with one another as we seek closer communion with the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ: the Sovereign Lord of all peoples, a God of justice and mercy, who calls us by his Name.