

**A Full Transcript of The Archbishop of Armagh's Presidential Address
at the Church of Ireland General Synod, Derry/Londonderry
16th May 2019**

It is a great pleasure to be here in the city of Derry/Londonderry, and we are, I know, most grateful to the Bishop and to the Diocese of Derry and Raphoe for their invitation, and for the welcome we have been given.

We cannot, of course, but be aware of the challenges and the great sadness that recent events in this city have brought to its people, and they are indeed in the prayers of us all. Our prayer is that, as this city has in so many ways demonstrated to us over the past years that there is a wholesome way forward following decades of division and violence, so the people of Derry/Londonderry will be enabled to show us again what can be done for the good of all the people of the city, and hence for the whole country.

You are all very welcome – “welcome back” in most cases – for what is the second year of the triennium of this General Synod, and I would also like to welcome most warmly our visitors from other Christian traditions who have come to be here with us. You are all very welcome and we look forward to hearing directly from a good number of you in the course of the Synod.

We are here in the Diocese of Derry and Raphoe and (as you will all know) we are marking the last few weeks of the episcopal ministry of Bishop Kenneth Good, who has been bishop of this diocese for almost seventeen years. We thank him for his faithful and truly outstanding service to the ordained ministry – over forty years in all – in different areas of the Church on this whole island, and in many different capacities. We now wish him and Mary a productive and happy retirement in the years ahead.

I would also wish, at the outset, to thank all those who have worked together to make this General Synod what will, I know, be a memorable occasion. The bishop, clergy and people of these dioceses, the honorary secretaries of General Synod and the staff of Church House. There will be further opportunities in the course of our proceedings to thank people individually but I think that it would be appropriate at this point to note in the record of this address our gratitude to Mr Trevor Stacey, the Head of Property and Trusts, who is to retire at the end of this month from the staff of the Representative Church Body. He has devoted his entire working life to the service of the RCB with conspicuous conscientiousness and diligence and we wish him and his family every happiness in his retirement.

We have a considerable amount of work ahead of us over these next two days. There will be the consideration of liturgical developments, there will also be detailed work on the suggested restructuring of General Synod representation and numerical size, and there will be further debate on the amalgamation of two of our dioceses, and there will be much else besides. All will require meticulous and respectful consideration. And we need as always to recall that everything we do is not only done in the sight of God, but is being done for the purposes of God.

This year marks one of those occasional milestones in the life of the Church of Ireland. It is one hundred and fifty years since the Church of Ireland was disestablished by act of the Westminster parliament in the summer of 1869, although it was given eighteen months in which to prepare for the huge realignment that this would involve. Over the next year or two there will be a number of events that will mark this sesquicentenary, and there will also be two publications which I hope and believe will be of note, and which should be available before the end of this calendar year. One of these is a “review” of the Church of Ireland *as it now is*, by a group of colleagues from other Christian traditions, who over recent months have been looking in at us from outside, from a perspective of what we might think of as *critical generosity*. Also in train is a book of essays considering the many developments within the Church of Ireland over the past fifty years, since the Church celebrated the centenary of its Disestablishment.

What I have described as a milestone demands, however, that even as we look back over the past, and as we work within the present realities, we are also looking forwards into the future. And we must be ready to live in a real world and address real issues in that world. If the Church is to be – as Christ calls it to be, a beacon for grace and truth – it cannot live in a ghetto designed only for self-preservation and self-congratulation.

We should therefore be aware that in a strange way the world around us which we are to serve in the name of the incarnate Lord Jesus Christ, is harking back to what it believes is a golden past but is also hurtling forwards into a very different and somewhat menacing future. Thirty years ago, in 1989, as the Berlin Wall came down and it was clear that the communist experiment was tottering, the American political scientist Francis Fukuyama wrote an essay (later developed into a book) famously entitled “the end of history”. In it he argued essentially that human civilisation had now reached the zenith of its development. Western-style liberal democracy had become the template for the world, and “the market” was now the world’s power house, its engine room. Fukuyama did not suggest that particular and even disturbing events might not go on occurring, but his argument was that human civilisation had stabilised at its summit. Last year, however, he published a very different book with the title *Identity*, and with an extremely revealing subtitle, ‘The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment’. History is indeed turning out rather unexpectedly. Men and women the world over now feel that they have been stripped of their dignity and have become deeply resentful of what they perceive (and are encouraged to perceive) as corrupt and unaccountable elites who are taking their dignity and their identity from them. This is at the very heart of what we call, on an almost daily basis, “populism”, and it is something which is imperilling the very roots of democracy and which we can see growing in strength in many countries throughout Europe and further afield. In a recent survey in Britain, more than 50% of those who responded said that they would favour a strong leader who did not mind breaking the rules. If this does not frighten us, it should. This is pointing back to that terrible decade of the nineteen thirties when, in more than one country, self-appointed messiahs sprang up and offered to remove corruption, to steer their country to a better future and to a new prosperity, but at the price of being given absolute and unaccountable power over the lives of their people. Anyone who believes this scenario is an impossibility in the world of today, but also as close to home as it is possible to be, is – I regret to say – living naively in a state of abject denial.

As we look back, as a Church tradition, at our own history, our own story, we also have to be very careful not to view the past with any deluded utopian myopia. We must also live in the world of today as responsible Christian citizens – *which means in practice being both thinking and active citizens (and, I would add, voting citizens)* – very aware of the massive dangers that a political vacuum inevitably poses to the well-being of all our people, particularly the most vulnerable. We need to be conscious also of how we all – wherever we may live on this island – can too easily be carried along mindlessly on a wave of popular and populist emotion, where mantras and knee-jerk soundbites are replacing reasoned, respectful and nuanced discussion. In the public square, anger has too often replaced decency, and a binary “black and white” polarisation has replaced any supple, generous and complex discourse. Christian disciples cannot opt out of what is happening around them, privatising their religion so that it has no function other than ensuring their individual salvation.

However – as there is, on the one hand, a reaching back into a rose-tinted mythology of the past, we are also careering onwards as humankind into a future which should be disturbing for us. We are now well in the grip of what is sometimes called “the fourth industrial revolution”. We have had the first industrial revolution where machines replaced production by hand, a second where mass production became viable through new sources of energy (particularly electricity and oil), and a third, where computerisation and information technology took hold. We are now living in the world of the fourth industrial revolution where – wirelessly – anything can be connected to anything, and can also be directly linked to advances in computerised robotics which mean that machines can, increasingly, do most of what needs to be done for humans. It is also a world where complex and complete data on anything and everything can be sent from anywhere to anywhere, and then processed, within milliseconds. I do not find the term “artificial intelligence” very helpful, but we are certainly living in an age where computers can, literally, teach themselves (and the robots that serve them) to improve their performance exponentially, and where humans are becoming ever less necessary for production, or even for the well-being of others.

In a realm of bio-technology that already exists, we could all be equipped with sensors within our bodies that could communicate with a central database as to the details of the state of our health, even if we had not visited a doctor for years. We know that the days of driving ourselves are probably limited. A self-driving vehicle – which with sophisticated satellite navigation can recognise exactly what is going on around it - might be a great deal safer than any other mode of transport. Certainly it will not get tired at the wheel, drive at absurd speeds, drive under the influence of drink or drugs, or suffer from road rage. We could give many other examples of what is now becoming possible and will soon become commonplace. All of which means that, as time goes on, we humans will be become of less “use” for what happens around us every day. It is estimated that, in the developed world, at least one-third of current employment options will probably have gone within a very short time, perhaps a decade or little longer. In the longer term, even those functions we might regard as needing the human touch or human ingenuity will be done for the most part by clever machines, connected to extremely clever self-learning computers.

This, of course, raises many questions – economic, social and political – but not least of these, for all of us, is the most existential question of all: “*What is it to be a human being?*” Most of us find much of our identity – *our value* – in what we do, or even perhaps what we used to do. If more and more people become – in economic or even societal terms – *use-less* (without any obvious usefulness in any utilitarian sense), what and where is their identity? What is it to be a human person, if we are of no definable use to society? Interestingly, even those without religious faith see this as a crucial question for humankind. The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari, who has written extensively on what the future may hold for us, spends a number of weeks each year on what you and I might think of as “a retreat” – pondering and thinking about what it is to be human, although he is entirely secular in outlook and belief.

As Christian disciples, we too have to set ourselves – anew – to think through constantly about what we really are as human persons, why we are set on Earth. The question of the psalmist in Psalm 8, who asks: “What is it to be a human person, that God might be mindful of us?” This is now a question that has to be reduced to its bare bones.

God does not evaluate us in terms of our usefulness. Through grace, we each have an infinite and unique value in the eyes of God, and the call of God in Christ to us is to convey that truth to those who do not see this, or who have never had the opportunity to see it. But it is a truth we can only convey in how we love and in how we live, and in what we believe to be crucial to human living on this Earth – how we care for others (including those who are, in human terms, no “use” to us), and how we care for the creation that God has given to us to protect. We are reminded of this within the *Anglican Five Marks of Mission* where we are called to respond to human need by loving service and called to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and to sustain and renew the life of the Earth. For the mission of the Church is the mission of Christ.

And these are the great challenges for Christian disciples in a real world where so much that we take for granted in our everyday existence will inevitably be changed beyond measure. Indeed, can we as individuals express the Christian faith clearly and concisely, *and* without using our “churchy language”, which in the world in which we live increasingly conveys nothing at all, even to the most sympathetic of those who have no existing connections with the church? Can we convey, by our lives, that every human person has an infinite value to us and to God?

I have long been fascinated by words of Paul Claudel, a French diplomat and writer who lived from the late nineteenth century through to the middle of the last century. *Don't talk about Jesus Christ, Claudel said, but live in such a way that people will ask you about Jesus Christ.* Now surely that is the great and essential challenge for every member of the Church of Ireland, as we face into a future beyond the sesquicentenary of our Disestablishment?

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