

**General Synod Service Sermon**  
**Bishop Paul Colton**  
**Embargo Until Delivery • Check Against Delivery**

‘Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ...’ *1 Corinthians 12.4*

This is St Paul’s opening gambit in a strong argument which he sets out in three parts in response to the challenges in the Church at Corinth. We heard only one of those arguments in today’s second reading. And alongside his argument we have, in the Old Testament reading, our calling; and in the Gospel, we have a promise. I will come back to each.

First let me tell you, here in Naas, about my predecessor, Bishop William Lyon. He was the longest serving Bishop of Cork, Cloyne and Ross (1586 to 1617) – so far at any rate. But what has he got to do with anything here, today? Well, he was presented to the vicarage of this parish on 6th November 1573. Bodenstown, nearby, was added to his living in 1580.

Whether in fact, as I do today, he ever preached here, is another matter. If he did indeed preach here, that would have been some feat for him, for one account of his episcopate declares that he only ever preached once in his entire time as bishop and that sermon was on the occasion of the death of his patron, Queen Elizabeth I. Lyon started out as captain of a ship, we are told, and his portrait in our dining room shows him in that sea captain’s uniform with one finger missing. He made his mark, apparently, in sea battles against the Spaniards and so, the Queen promised him the next suitable vacancy that came up. That was the bishopric of Ross and, to her surprise, he called in the favour. She couldn’t get her head around it, protested at first, and then clearly decided that sailing ships and fighting enemies is a good training ground to be a bishop.

Unlike Bishop Lyon and his ministry, like others of you, I’ve preached many thousands of times, but this is only the second occasion on which I’ve had the privilege – and that’s what it is – of being asked to preach at the opening of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland. Last time, Tuesday night 14th May 2002, in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, I chose a text from the Acts of the Apostles – a description of St Paul’s visit to the Church at Ephesus where he was confronted with, not Spaniards in sea battle, but with fierce arguments and even a riot. We were told in Acts 19:

‘Meanwhile, some were shouting one thing, some another; for the assembly was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together...’ (Acts. 19.32)

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Sounds a bit like some General Synods. Few bishops are given the opportunity to preach twice at this important gathering and I thank the Archbishop of Armagh for his invitation to preach here this morning. Thank you also to the rector of this parish for his welcome. I especially thank the Bishop of Meath for her permission to enter her diocese to exercise public ministry. That permission, incidentally, is not a matter of mere church etiquette nor is it simple human courtesy. Exercising ministry only on one's own patch, be it diocese or parish, and not elsewhere without permission, is a canonical principle that was laid down in the canons of the First Council of Nicaea which met 1,700 years ago this year, in 325 AD, starting like us in this month of May, but, in their case, not ending until July that year.

Conscious of that riot at Ephesus which inspired my biblical text 23 years ago; mindful of the disagreements at Nicaea in 325, and knowing that St Paul was confronting a fractious situation in Corinth, we have to admit that throughout the history of the Church arguing seems to go hand in hand with Christian community. Has there ever been a time when dispute has not been a dynamic of discipleship and pilgrimage? I've been attending General Synods for the last 44 years, and for 33 years of those as a member. I've never known a Synod where there was not some hot topic –sometimes very heated and politicised. Certain hot potatoes have been on the boil for many decades now and remain unresolved. In spite of all the disputes and disagreements, an immense amount of good has been done, is being done and can still be done.

But, have courage! Arguments are nothing new. During Jesus' lifetime the disciples argued and onlookers argued too. No sooner had he recruited disciples than they started jostling for position: 'An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest.' (Luke 9.46) And that argument cropped up more than once (see Luke 22.24-27). The day of Pentecost itself caused a controversial stir: 'All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?"' But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine." (Acts 2.12-13) Saint Peter had to step in to clarify. And in spite of that shaky start, not many verses later we read that they enjoyed 'the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' (Acts 2.47) Arguments, but still good was being done.

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Again not many chapters later in Acts we encounter the Council of Jerusalem, which gathered to discuss a thorny issue, and a letter was issued and dispatched (Acts 15). A mere four chapters after that there was that riotous commotion at Ephesus.

It seems to me that our calling as Christian disciples and our ministry and mission as Church – set out so amply and clearly in the Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion – are inescapably tied up with dynamics of disagreement, argument and controversy. It has ever been thus. Perhaps only a broken church can be of any use to a broken world – paradoxically. I wonder. Certainly in history, God has called again and again broken people to serve and proclaim him. Should it come as any surprise then that, assembled together, broken individuals are in lots of ways, a broken assembly – yet, paradoxically we are called by God to be instruments of his healing, reconciliation and love?

Our first reading is clear about our task and calling. The ‘spirit of the Lord God is upon [us], we are ‘anointed’ and ‘sent’ to do what? Among other things ‘to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted ...’ (Isaiah 61.1-3)

And the world in which and to which we make that proclamation is indeed broken with many who are oppressed and broken-hearted – many who are captives and many who mourn. So setting out into the work of this General Synod our task is clear. When the surrender took place on VE Day, 80 years ago, yesterday, it was already 9th May – today – in Russia due to the different time zones. VE Day yesterday, and now today is the 80th Victory Day in Russia and in countries of the former Soviet Union. This anniversary reminds us of the hell the world went through relatively recently – a world of warped ideologies, genocide, inhumanity, indescribable suffering that have left indelible scars on humanity that still shape us and our geopolitics. Anniversaries like those beg the question ‘what lessons have been learnt?’ And here still, today, is a time of conflict, ideological turmoil, suffering, uncertainty, brokenness, and we are at the mercy, it seems, of what one commentator has called ‘whiplash policy-making’.

In our proclamation of the good news to the broken-hearted, we should not be afraid. God’s promise to us is equally clear. We have that in our Gospel reading. We are to love him and to keep his commandments. In all that we are and do we have his promise to be with us: ‘... I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever.’ (John 14.16).

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So, what does the argumentative and contentious setting of the Church at Corinth and Saint Paul's letter to the people there have to say to us – in our discipleship, as a Church and as we do the work of a General Synod? Corinth was a crossroads, a cosmopolitan place where cultures clashed, ideologies, belief systems and outlooks confronted each other. There were contentious debates about leadership, morality and spiritual leadership. And here is St Paul's response to all of that – a response that to too many people in our time has become a dirty word, a woke word: Paul's response is – 'diversity'.

Diversity is here at the heart of the first strand of Paul's three-part argument Saint Paul affirms the need for a 'wide variety of manifestations of the one Spirit within the church. He emphasises the need and value of diversity within unity. Why? Because diversity and unity are part of the character of God himself (verse 4-11). 'Paul's point seems clear: Diversity, not uniformity, is essential for a healthy church. The Authorised Version – King James – makes the point for me even better:

'Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit.' (1 Corinthians 12.4)

'... varieties of services, but the same Lord ...' (1 Corinthians 12.5)

'... varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.' (1 Corinthians 12.5 and 6)  
And so continues this first part of his three-part argument.

As we do our work here in this General Synod, in today's readings we have a clear, but challenging task, an enduring promise from God, both of those are hard to grasp, but the really hard one to wrestle with is in that message from Saint Paul – constantly working on and rediscovering that unity of purpose and quality of love that God, in Jesus, calls us to in the midst of our rich, God-given diversity.

'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit ...' *1 Corinthians 12.4*