Full text of the Presidential Address delivered by the Rt Rev Alan Abernthey, Bishop of Connor, to Diocesan Synod on Wednesday June 17 2009

Introduction

I didn't realise what was in the box, it has moved house with us a few times and I assumed is was just old papers that someday might be useful. It fell off the shelf and I was intrigued to find a copy of my first ever sermon, preached before I had even begun ordination training. I am not sure I had Episcopal permission but it wasn't in Connor. My rector had invited me to speak at a midweek service that was held in the parish hall. My text sprung out at me it was Psalm 46 verse 10.

"Be still and know that I am God."

As I reflect upon the busyness of living in our society and culture I find this verse a challenge and yet an encouragement. I have to confess my exegesis was poor but the need for stillness and pause in the frenetic activity we all live with is so critical. Archbishop Michael Ramsey wrote: "Would that everyone whose heart God has once touched would guard times of quietness in our noisy, bustling life, to let God touch the heart again." Robin Sharma in his book, "The monk who sold his Ferrari" puts it as follows: "Slow things down. Enjoy the beauty and sacredness of all that is around you."

Throughout the history of the church there has been the tension that is also witnessed in the gospels, the tension between the desert and the market place. For me I best reflect upon this tension as I describe it as the struggle between doing and being.

So much of our life together is about doing and that is reflected in the various reports and issues that will be before us today. I am not in anyway questioning the importance of what has to be done but I want to ask the question as to how we can find ways as individuals and as communities of faith to learn how to be rather than always be doing? To find ways of listening, being silent and of discerning the presence of God always with us. There is a sacramental element to this, as we are still and quiet, God will take our brokenness and emptiness and touch the world with His grace. I believe that our present culture needs to be challenged in the very busy lifestyle that is often about achievement, power and the importance of the individual. There is a questioning of authority, disillusionment with church and political life, anger at the way many people have lost their savings and their pensions, and understandable fear about what is ahead for us all in terms of employment, housing and income.

What is our message in the midst of the chaos and what have we to offer? I do not believe it is endless sermons or papers but rather an ability to somehow find a quiet centre in the middle of the chaos. We must find ways of being a place of refuge and loving acceptance for all. We need to learn more of what it is to be rather than always be doing, to be the presence of Christ in the chaos.

Let me seek to apply my thinking to the Bishops Mission Statement that we are seeking to implement, under the three words, ***Growth Unity and Service.***

Growth

This concept of growth can often be taken to simply mean more people attending or joining parishes. That is certainly part of the hope for the future. However I also believe that a critical part of our life together is about learning more of what it is to be quiet and still to enable us to discern God's presence in the confusion of our society.

We need to be communities of faith that aren't so busy doing things that we have no quality of life for others as they come into our community. This will impact on the quality of our liturgical expressions of worship and our ability to be places for people just to be. Growth is also about the idea of catechesis. This is part of the charge that those who are ordained priest are given. We must ensure that one of the priorities in parish life is to make disciples and to nurture faith and an enriching spirituality. As individuals and as communities the growth is about depth and quality of our life together in Christ.

Unity

There is an obvious need for the churches to ensure that we do all we can to work out the unity that is a gift from God. This unity is about relationships and affirmation of one another in Christ. I believe it is critical we find ways of praying together, that we can share with each other the riches of our own heritage in Christ. I have learnt so much from other Christian traditions and would find it impossible to survive the constant giving of ordained ministry without the times of refreshment I find in places like the Benedictine Monastery at Rostrevor. The prayers and support of Brother Mark-Ephraim and the brothers there is a special gift to me. It is often as we pray together, as we are still together that we can find new insights into our own journey of faith from other fellow travellers. This unity of spirit is so much more important than a false structural unity. I want to say a particular thank you to my new colleague in ministry, Bishop Noel Treanor, the new Catholic Bishop of Down and Connor. It has been a blessing to have been able to express our concerns and prayers for this community from the context of our friendship in Christ. This was particular important when we witnessed the awful scenes at Massarene Barracks earlier this year. To be able to be a presence together for peace and against violence and hatred was more important than just words. I hope and pray that our faith communities will experience more of what it is to be one in Christ with other traditions as we need to be in relationship to give hope to the wider community.

[Here Bishop Abernethy inserted an addition to his address, reading the words of condemnation he had issued earlier in the day relating to the recent spate of attacks which drove Romanian families from their homes in south Belfast. He stated: "I condemn the recent deplorable attacks on Romanian people living in south Belfast which have forced fellow human beings resident within our community to pack up their belongings and seek refuge beyond their homes.

"We, from our legacy of divisions, should know the damage which all racially motivated acts – whether words or deeds – can do and must reject such activity and thinking."

The Bishop went on: "I commend City Church and all who have assisted those affected for demonstrating care and compassion as Christ would have us do. I also assure the Romanian families of our prayers and thoughts at this time."]

Service

I have always found the prologue of St. John's gospel inspiring and energising. The fact that the incarnation is depicted by the phrase "He came and pitched His tent among us," or "He came and dwelt among us." The imagery gives a wonderful insight into what ministry is all about. We are called as local faith communities to be the presence of Christ in that community. We can often be distracted like Martha into

trying to do things for or to the local community instead of being there with them. In the being and listening we might be better able to find ways of re-connecting with the many communities we appear disconnected from. I have been very conscious in the people who do not belong to any church how they actually do want the church to be part of local communities and not detached from them.
It is one of the questions I have been probing with the select vestries I have visited and will be continuing to visit for some time to come. How can we find ways of ensuring our tent is pitched in the community to be the presence of Christ there?

Children's Ministry

I am very grateful to the Rev'd Professor Leslie Francis, Mr. Peter Hamill and Mrs. Margaret Rutherford for the patient and careful research they have undertaken in the diocese on children's ministry. The research should be written up in the autumn and by synod next year we will certainly be able to present a strategy for the future development of this aspect of our diocesan and parochial ministry. I am more than ever convinced at the critical importance of our ministry not to but with children as they such a gift to us as God's people.

Yei

The partnership with the diocese of Yei has produced a genuine care and love for the needs of the people there. To date we have raised
£72,000. However this partnership is not just about money or schools and I will be visiting the diocese next year and Bishop Hilary and I have already discussed how this partnership could be developed by some exchange visits. We are very grateful for the help of CMSI for their help and support in this 3 way partnership. Mr David Gough has been an enthusiastic and supportive colleague.

Kajiado.

I would value your prayers this August as I will be travelling to Kajiado diocese in Kenya to speak at the clergy conference for Bishop Jeremiah Taama. There is a team coming with me from Connor made up of Liz, Archdeacon Barry and Norma Dodds and Rodger and Desnie Cromey. Your prayers for safe and healthy travel would be appreciated. I will be bringing them your greetings.

Anniversaries

ORDINATION ANNIVERSARIES:

40 YEARS:	The Reverend J E G Bach
	The Reverend R Henderson
	The Reverend Canon C J Kenny
	The Reverend J A McMaster
50 YEARS:	The Reverend J C Irvine
60 YEARS:	The Reverend Canon J R Hall

St. Brigid's Mallusk

I want to say a special thanks to this parish for hosting our synod again. They are in our thoughts and prayers as they come to terms with the tragic death of their rector's wife Sandra Boyce. They are a parish that has set a wonderful example of a caring and supportive Christain community. Sandra and Bill were very grateful for your amazing support during the last two years while they settled not this parish and were dealing with terminal illness. I pay tribute to them on behalf of Sandra. From Bill a thank you for your ongoing love, prayers and support he is aware that he is in a place where he has been and will be supported. I would want this synod to join with me in assuring him of our love and prayers in his grief.

Thanks

My thanks to the diocesan office staff for their support and encouragement we are served so willingly and ably by the team. Particular thanks to Mr. Neil Wilson, his wisdom, patience and humour have been a great blessing to many for over 30 years. Thanks also to my archdeacons for their fellowship and friendship. The rural deans are also a great gift to the smooth running of the diocese and we are served well. The clergy, various parochial staff, lay readers, parish readers and the many volunteers in parish life are what give me great hope for the future. My prayer is that we will increasingly see how we are all connected to each other as we seek to be channels of Christ's presence.

Thanks also to Peter Hamill, Karen Bushby and last but not least Rosemary Patterson who manages to help me in the right place at the right time and also encourages me so much.

To my family my special thanks, Liz, Peter and Ruth help me know what it is to be valued and they help me laugh at myself.