PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
at the
DOWN AND DROMORE DIOCESAN SYNOD
by
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It is always a challenge for a bishop to know what to say in his Presidential Address each year at the Diocesan Synod. There are times when this address has been used to speak into the particular situations of the day: political, social, educational, and even financial. There are even times when it has caused a degree of controversy in the press. But this year, I have made a decision to speak only of the Church and to the Church, because we need to remember that a Diocesan Synod is a meeting of delegates from the churches in the diocese to carry out the work of the church in this place and generation. And, after thirteen years and more as your bishop, I have become ever more convinced that, unless we are fulfilling our vocation of truly being the Church of Jesus Christ where God has set us, then anything else we say, not least in ways which are critical of our society, will ring hollow and come back to haunt us.

Let me begin with two references to a person who has been very influential in my own Christian leadership - Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church, near Chicago. Bill Hybels is most often quoted as saying these words: 'the local church is the hope of the world' Interestingly, the rest of the quote is rarely used, but in my view equally important, when he says: 'and its future lies primarily in the hands of its leaders. I am presuming, for this purpose, that you are leaders chosen by your parishes as representatives at this important event, or leaders in the sense of licensed clergy in the diocese, and that, therefore, the future of the church in this diocese is truly, and God-givenly, in your hands. Its future hopes and possibilities, vision and strategy, lie here as well as in the leadership in your local congregations. That is a frighteningly wonderful starting point for this year's Synod, and we will return to it later.

One of the reasons why I am a fan of Bill Hybels is that he sometimes dares to put into words the things I don't always admit to myself. In the Willow Creek *Network* course which I first did under the tutelage of Ken Good when he was a rector in this diocese (and I was in Cork), people discover certain things about themselves. Basically, you discover your gifts, your style of working (whether you are people-oriented or task-oriented - and the church needs both!), and then, your *passion*. This is the course taught by Norman Jardine each September for those considering ministry in contexts wider than the parish, and I encourage you to send people on it. I will never forget the discovery of my own 'passion' - the thing I would hanker after, and stay awake thinking about at night. It goes something like this, and it is only right that you should know the passion placed on my life as your father-in-God:

> *My passion is to see churches become places where a glimpse of the Kingdom of God is revealed here on earth for all to see.*

The way I put it in sermons from time to time is this: Churches must be places of the

‘Fourth Dimension’ - places where heaven and earth meet. Everyone who comes to be with us in our worship and life together, and especially those who do not yet believe, has a right to expect that they will meet with the living Lord, and that a spiritual dimension of life will be revealed to them in a way which is not to be found in the world outside. That, in the end, is what the Church is *for*: to make God’s presence known in and to the world; to see answered the Lord’s own prayer:

Your Kingdom come,
Your will be done,
On earth as in heaven.

I don’t need to say, as the corollary of that, that it is devastating to the work of the Kingdom if people come to church seeking the fourth dimension of life from the people of God, and find there either that nothing is different from the world around - it is simply ordinary three-dimensionality - or, God forbid, that the Church is a place of two dimensional ‘cardboard cut-out’ life which makes them relieved to get out into the sunshine into normality at the end of worship - a not entirely unknown and very depressing experience!

And that brings me back to the second word from Bill Hybels. I heard him say it at a Leadership Summit, when he spoke about the *Popeye* factor! Many of you will have heard me use this illustration before, but Bill Hybels also tells leaders that we must go on and on and on re-stating the vision, so I use it again. My ‘passion’ came from the fact, quite honestly, that my experience of the Church of Ireland in my youth was not entirely positive. I had found in a local Methodist Church an embracing fellowship, largely through the Boys’ Brigade. A place of palpable faith, a place of love and acceptance, a place of life in its fulness, and a place engaged with the community at large. My limited Church of Ireland experience at that time presented me with a wonderful liturgy, with deep and resonating words, saying and doing all the right things, but in all honesty for me, very little relationship, community, warmth and life. And I wanted the two to be together (good doctrine and liturgy and vibrant communal Christian life), and still do. What I said so often to myself, and still say so often in my experience of worship is best expressed in the words of the song : *There must be more than this!* And I hope you sometimes say the same. Otherwise we will simply not critique ourselves or grow.

Do you remember *Popeye the Sailorman*? Each cartoon had the same kind of ‘liturgy’. There was Popeye, a rather scrawny character, and his girlfriend Olive Oyl, and then there was the ‘baddie’, muscular Bluto who would come into the picture, run off with Olive Oyl and Popeye would look on, ineffectual. Then came the key words, ’That’s all I can stand, I can’t stand no more!’, out would come the can of spinach, he would down it in one go, his muscles would appear, and he would go out and sort out Bluto in no uncertain terms, and get Olive back into his arms!

Bill Hybels said the unsayable: Most strong leaders are in the role they are in because of a ‘Popeye’ moment; a moment of ‘That‘s all I can stand, I can‘t stand no more!.’ That is what drives them, and many of us, to do what we are doing. It is a longing that things might be different and more - a determination that they will be different. That the local church truly will be revealed to be the hope of the world - and we are going to be the leaders who, under God, make that hope real in our generation.

That is also why I have recently become a vice-president of *Tearfund.* It is because the principles of *Tearfund* are something I am profoundly committed to. *Tearfund* believes in working through local churches all over the developing world, and indeed at home as well. *Tearfund's* vision is to see 50million people released from material and spiritual poverty through a worldwide network of 100,000 churches. It seeks to connect local churches here to local churches there in a vast web of Christian relationships, believing, as I have personally experienced in many parts of the world, that the local church knows the local situation, provides a context and route for development, and sees the local situation in the context of the whole of the Gospel. NGOs have a very important place, but it is the local church which is always there, well after the crisis is gone, and in the midst of the worst crises as well, even in the places NGOs don't reach. I saw this in Southern Sudan in 1999, when it was self-evident that the structures and community of the local church were all that were left after a time of great devastation, and that the local church *was* the aid agency in Maridi. I will have the privilege, DV, of visiting Cambodia at the invitation of *Tearfund* in November of this year, along with Jono Pierce, the Rector of St Finnian's, who has been selected to join me by the *Bishops' Appeal.* The local church *is* the hope of the world.

Before I go into some detail about ways in which I would love to see this passion (for the local church to be a glimpse of heaven) worked out even more fully in Down and Dromore, I want to say something about what the local church *is.* There are two, or possibly more, different ways of understanding the local church in Anglicanism, and as the Archdeacon of Down pointed out in his answers to questions on the Standing Committee Report at General Synod, that is not surprising because the phrase 'the local church' is not found in our Anglican formularies. However, there are some important words about the church as the congregation of God's people. In Article 19:

> *The visible Church of Christ is a Congregation of faithful men* (sic) *in which the pure word of God is preached, and the sacraments be duly administered…*

There is a notion doing the rounds these days that the essential 'local church' is the diocese. I don't quite see that, either in practice or in Anglican teaching. The 'congregation' is essentially the community of believers, and there is a visibility of that community meeting in a particular place for all to see. That is the use of the word 'congregation' throughout the *Homilies,* which we are referred to for teaching in the 39 Articles. That does not undermine the place of the diocese, which can be very important in knitting the congregations together with their bishop, in inspiring gatherings, in speaking to the wider world, in administration, in encouragement, and in mutual support. But of its nature, the truth about the Church (which in its widest sense is all believers in Jesus Christ in every place and generation, on earth and in heaven) *has to be made visible in each locality.*

That is why you have each church in the New Testament identified by its meeting place, town, city or area. Let me give you some examples:

- *Romans 16:5: '*Greet Priscilla and Aquila. Greet also the church which meets in their house' (a home).
- *1 Corinthians 1:2: '*To the church of God that is in Corinth' (a city).
- *Galatians 1:2 '*To the churches of Galatia' (a region).

And, of course, we not only have geographical expressions of church, which I have to say is normatively New Testament, but also nowadays *Fresh Expressions of Church,* though in reality most of those as we experience them have a strong geographical rootedness as well. What is important is that people in every place can *see* the church at work, so that what is true of the Church of Jesus Christ is, as it were, funnelled down in a focussed way in every place and generation. *You* are the church in *your* place, along, of course, with other believers in other denominations, and *your* task is to make the Gospel real in *your* community here and now today. And what a high calling that is: to make the grace of God known and experienced where *you* are in *your* congregational life together.

If I were to concretize that in the Diocese of Down and Dromore in 2010, I would do so under the heading **'www'**. This Presidential Address is a calling to do the ordinary 'www' things of 'church' well!

Welcome

Ireland is said to be a place of welcomes. '*Cead mile failte'* is the one phrase in Irish which we all know: 'a hundred thousand welcomes' I want to invite all of you, every single person on this Diocesan Synod, to ask the question; 'How do we make our church a more welcoming place?' This should be a natural area of strength in our 'friendly' Irish culture, but sadly, even after the five years of *Think Again*, and its focus on this area it is still an area of serious weakness in many places. And, quite honestly, it is an area of weakness which could be made an area of strength with the smallest amount of intentionality. Almost overnight!

Let me begin with the view a stranger, or even a person who has lived in the area for years, might have of our buildings which we call 'church'- the places inhabited by the worship of God's people, sometimes even described as the 'House of God', and seen as symbols of God's presence in each community. Most of our church buildings are superbly well looked after, and that itself is a sign of the value we place on them. But there are some which are dowdy, grey, even fearsome and unattractive, and we should admit that, but in truth we often have got used to them and don't see it. But, first and foremost, many are closed for at least six days of the week, and that at a time when people, even unchurched people, are often hankering for sacred space in which to be quiet and pray. I know all the reasons for keeping buildings closed, but do not believe that they are insurmountable. Our churches are designed, not just as places for public worship, but also as places of personal devotion. We need to open them up for all to explore, walk around, meditate and pray in or even just find refuge in, even if there is a degree of risk attached. And there is nothing worse than gates with padlocks round them! I once saw a church with padlocked gates, and a poster on the Wayside Pulpit saying: 'Jesus said, 'I am the gate'! Use every opportunity to open up churches: flower festivals, 24/7 Prayer, guided tours, whatever: make them places of an ever open door! You will be amazed at the people who may find God there.

The other thing a stranger will subconsciously look for is signs of life and welcome: sometimes even information. When I drive past Stormont Presbyterian Church, I smile, because there is always a humorous but not heavy poster outside. It says: 'We want to relate to the passer by, and we enjoy a bit of a smile!' Not a bad message! Churches should be well, but not extravagantly lit: that creates a welcoming mood. Otherwise they can become a dark patch of gloom in places of light on winter evenings.

And we as members of the Church of Ireland need to be a lot less nervous about setting out our stall for all to see. I observe that many of our notice boards have been created for the world in which people walk everywhere. They are often neat, sometimes ancient, regularly have too much irrelevant information, appear churchy and are unseen by the thousands who drive by, because no one has ever asked the question 'Who are they for?' I am really thrilled to see this area being taken more seriously, and new 'styles of notice boards appearing slowly but surely.

And, apart from the ubiquitous *Christian Aid* banners, which I congratulate all of us on, we seem to think that big welcoming banners are beneath us! After all, we are Anglicans, and people should simply come to us!

I remember one parish with a *Power to Change* banner up some years ago, pointed to by a man from the community with these words: 'Boys, things are changing here: the church is going to the pub, and the pub is going to the church'. I would be thrilled to see *Back to Church Sunday* banners on every church in the diocese for the last Sunday in September. What an opportunity! Read more about it on the diocesan website. Ah! and there's another possible welcome, or otherwise!

But the welcome inside the church must also be good. Not overpowering, but real. People welcoming others at the door or in the porch must be people with the gift of hospitality, who enjoy meeting new people, who can make them feel at home, and who can introduce them to others. I would separate the role from that of churchwardens. And they mustn't be taking with each other when a new person comes in. The grace of God is revealed, no less, when a person with a warm look, focuses on the stranger and makes them feel at home. That is the beginning of the Gospel, no less!

The same is true of people in the pews. Give gifted people the task of welcoming the newcomer and chatting with them. Assign a set of pews if necessary to a particular person to cover, but don't overlook it.

And even serving a cup of tea can, if a church chooses to do so, become a ministry. This is a gift which can be exercised by people who are not big 'up front' people, but who simply get pleasure out of looking after others. When Liz and I go on holidays we sometimes don't stay for a cup of tea, because we have so often had the experience of feeling marginalized, chatting to each other and feeling that we have to 'get in on other conversations', having to find the tea, being asked for 20p for a cup of miserable instant coffee, and being in the midst of people who evidently know each other, but have no interest in the newcomer.

Brother and sisters, leaders in this church, these things are serious. It is the lack of welcome that has people coming into our churches, but not staying: they will simply haemorrhage because of the lack of simple humanity; but where they find a '*Cead mile failte'*, they will also find a home, and be open to a welcoming and embracing Gospel.

Worship

The second area to which we must pay attention is the quality of the worship experience. First of all, I want to say that there are many areas of encouragement in relation to worship. The quality of music in many of our churches is often first class, and both the Organ Scholarship Scheme and the vast amount of work put in by ever

more excellent music groups are to be commended. The variety of styles of service for differing groups and needs is inspiring and growing, and reaching in some places an entirely new generation - I heard of one new weekly service for young families begun recently in St Donard's Bloomfield, which had a congregation of 80 people, pretty well all new people, earlier this month; and the quality of a good deal of the preaching and teaching which can be found sometimes on parish websites (in case you are short of a sermon, and which allows the bishop to listen) is first rate. I thank you all, and ask lay people to inspire and encourage your clergy to give more time and attention to the study of the Word of God and to preaching in a way which feeds the soul, stirs the heart and informs the mind.

But, above all, worship must be a meeting of the people of God with the One who is their love above all other loves. That is the 'fourth dimension'. It must be such that the unbeliever in our midst falls down and worships the Lord who is among us. And one of the things I have discovered over the years is that that is not dependent on numbers, nor is it the preserve of any churchmanship or particular 'style' of worship; it is much more dependent on the 'engagement' of the worshipping community. I have been in small congregations of a dozen or fifteen, where the living God has been palpably present, and I have been in large congregations where there is a pervading sense of deadness in the spirits of the people.

Much of this is subjective. I know that. But it is, nevertheless, a key element. If I were to put a finger on the main reason why we have lost so many young people in so many of our churches, I would hazard this guess: *They were not convinced that there was integrity in what we were doing*. We proclaimed wonderful things in words, but to them our hearts seemed far from it. We said things in church but didn't seem to act on them in our lives. There is a word for that: *Nominalism*. If there is one thing we need to repent of in the Church of Ireland it has been our attachment to, and even at times, exaltation of, nominalism. Enthusiasm was thought of as improper, and nominalism, if we are honest, sometimes prevailed. And here is how you see it. You see it in congregations which gradually worship once a Sunday rather than twice, and then once a fortnight rather than weekly, and then one a month, etc. You see it where the most unanswered prayer we utter is 'O Lord open our lips', and people do not sing with gusto in case they might be misunderstood or thought too excitable!. You see it in endless pathetic jokes about short sermons, rather than a desire to pray for preachers, in expectation that them word of God will come into our lives in transforming ways as we meet together in worship. You see it where there is no palpable reverence, especially at the most holy time of communion; and you see it where there are no times of serious prayer and bible study, and where there is no serious proportionate and sacrificial giving.

When outsiders come into our community at our 'key point' of Sunday worship, they need to go away knowing that there is no greater joy in our lives, no greater highpoint in our week than being among the people of God worshipping the one who is the very centre and redeemer of our lives - and that comes only, in the truest sense of the word, from the conversion of the heart.

Witness

The third 'w' is witness. And I must be briefer here. Emil Brunner famously said; 'The Church exists by mission as fire exists by burning', and Archbishop William Temple famously said, 'The church is the only society which exists for the benefit of those who

are not its members.' The church exists to witness to the love of Christ and the truth of the Gospel in the world in which we live. I don't imagine that many people will disagree with any of that. But it is salutary to remind ourselves that witness is costly. Indeed the word witness in Greek is literally the word 'martyr'. There are aspects to the word 'witness' which we have reason to be afraid of. A witness puts their neck on the line; a witness speaks out the truth about what they have seen and heard, and a witness may be challenged about what they have said. Indeed, in witnessing to the truth, someone may well leave themselves open to danger, misunderstanding, and in some contexts, even death. But 'witness' is what we are called to for the sake of the world.

The witness of the Church is, to a large extent, the witness of the members of the Church, individual Christians, living out their lives in their locality, their work, their free time, simply being what they are. What a joy it is to see committed Christian people in every walk of life here in Northern Ireland. But I want to suggest to you that the 'church', the community of the people of God also needs to have a strong sense of its role to witness together. That is a witness, first and foremost to the love of Jesus Christ: in pastoral care, in meeting the needs of children and young people, in providing space for the community, in practical acts of love and concern, in pastoral counselling, in transforming society.

We see examples of that at this Synod. Last year, we heard about *Christians against Poverty*, and the work it enables the church to do in helping people overcome debt. This year, we have two centres up and running in the diocese: one in Magheralin/Dollingstown for this area, and one in Belfast, run by the Lagan Area Deanery. In both cases, a large sum of money has been provided by churches in this diocese to enable this to happen. Or you have the amazing work of *Love for Life*, under Dr Dickie Barr, in an intelligent and sensitive way enabling children in schools throughout Ireland to be given wise direction and help with sex and relationships. Dickie is a member of St Saviour's Dollingstown, and I know *Love for Life* will need more support than ever from our churches.

Or you have the parishes which engage in what are called 'indiscriminate acts of kindness': simply offering people small symbolic gifts with a card saying that they are here if people need help or support. Perhaps we might hear of some of those during our *Conversation on the Work of God* this afternoon.

I could go on and on. The DVD done by the *Council for Mission*, which you will see a clip from later today will give real and practical ideas about how we might express the love of God to those around us.

There are a few other things I want to say at this point:

Please note that witnessing to God's love as churches is not something that we do only when we are strong. It is actually something we can do very powerfully when we are weak. A small community of faith can do it very powerfully indeed.
When we feel we are lacking in energy, it is witness in the power of the Spirit which literally energizes the church. Look at the weak disciples in the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost. They had to get out of the upper room and into the world to live out the life of the Spirit and see people transformed.

There are times when witness and the priority of mission will mean laying down some of our structures, our ways of doing things and even our beloved buildings for the sake of the Kingdom.

The church witnesses best when it has a large 'fringe'. One of the worrying statistics I have observed over the past decade is that the discrepancy between the number of people who claim to be Church of Ireland, and the number submitted to the diocese on parish lists is getting greater and greater. That suggests a dwindling 'fringe'. There are lots of reasons why that may happen, but my plea is 'Reverse it quickly; get out there as parishes, make friendships and relationships with those who are not of the household of God, take them under your wing, and win them for Christ!

The Church witnesses also to the truth of the Gospel: the Gospel which is counter-cultural, which has values which sometimes are not acceptable in our society. More and more this is our calling, and not least here in Ulster, where we had got used to being the *status quo.*

When I say that, most of us in our minds go to moral issues, but I want to raise a question and leave it hanging a little. It is a question which has preoccupied much of my own episcopal ministry:

What does it mean for the Church to witness in a world of sectarian division? Especially when the Church is seen as part of that division, and could be thought to benefit from it?

What kind of martyrdom might that witness lead to? Norman Hamilton, the new Presbyterian moderator has raised the key question of how government sees the so-called 'shared (or shared and better) future'. I think part of our missional agenda is to ask a question which may take a long time to answer:

- How much are we committed to a shared future?
- How much are we committed to forgiveness?
- How might we give a lead, witnessing to the values of Jesus Christ in our particular world of today?

It is all potentially very disturbing but also very exciting. Living as disciples of Jesus is not as simple as we thought it might be. But, to return to Bill Hybels, 'the local church is the hope of the world'. And then that bit we really need to hear today: 'and its future lies primarily in the hands of its leaders. You and me. It's that focussed and that serious. And there is no greater calling!