Sermon to be preached in Down Cathedral by The Rt Revd Norman Hamilton, Moderator of The Presbyterian Church, on St Patrick's Day 2011

EMBARGOED UNTIL 12.30pm, Thursday 17th March 2011
PLEASE CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thanks and privilege

This is a day full of great traditions - not least amongst them the pilgrimage from Saul, and the service here in the Cathedral. It is a great delight to see this place so full as we have come to worship God, and to give thanks to him for the wonderful heritage in Christ that we have received, with St Patrick being central to our worship and to that heritage. We have so very much to be thankful for – and in a world where our brothers and sisters in Christ are so often harassed or even persecuted, we must not take our thanksgiving today – or any day – for granted.

Bishop Harold has asked me specifically to explore with you what Patrick would say to us about how we might share this land together and relate to each other rather better than we do. This is a very big political issue, but it is also a big Bible issue and a big gospel issue. In the argy bargy of politics and radio phone-ins, it is so easy for those of us who are committed to Jesus Christ to have our attitudes and values shaped more by politics than by the Scriptures and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed the Apostle Paul warns us in no uncertain terms against allowing that to happen!

Romans 13.1- 3 in The Message

Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out.. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.

These are strong words, and every believer needs to take them seriously – and that includes bishops, and Moderators!

It is at the core of Jesus' teaching that we are to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, minds and strength, and - out of that / flowing from that - to love our neighbours as ourselves…. especially people who are not like us. The story of the Good Samaritan is one of the best known of all the parables that Jesus told. Jews and Samaritans were distinctly hostile to each other – effectively North / South enmity – and so it was close to a scandalous story for Jesus to tell of a hated Samaritan being both needed and gracious enough to help a seriously beaten up Jew. And then for Jesus to talk to a Samaritan woman at a well! Well Well!!!

The ongoing bad feeling / poor relations were spelled out again in the passage we read earlier from Luke 9

Luke 9. 51 – 56 When it came close to the time for his Ascension, he gathered up his courage and steeled himself for the journey to Jerusalem. He sent messengers on ahead. They came to a Samaritan village to make arrangements for his hospitality. ***But when the Samaritans learned that his destination was Jerusalem, they refused hospitality. When the disciples James and John learned of it, they said, "Master, do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down out of the sky and incinerate them?"***

[55-56] Jesus turned on them: "Of course not!" And they travelled on to another village.

It is very noteworthy that the NT is almost consistently favourable towards the Samaritans, and that they are portrayed as people who responded enthusiastically to Jesus. He, the Jew, showed personally that they mattered to him, even though everyone else in 'his own community' appeared to think differently.

This is a scary example to follow – but all of us who are followers of Jesus are to be just that – followers / imitators / learners / disciples of him. The Scriptures do not allow us the awful luxury of being selective about who matters and whom we should associate – even love and care for.

Surely the application of this is crystal clear… Christ's people are to love the neighbour with as much intensity and care as we love ourselves. Churches and congregations are not to be chaplains to themselves, mirroring the attitudes, opinions and prejudices of those whose allegiance they attract. They – rather WE – are to be groups for whom the welfare of other people, spiritually, physically, emotionally

matters a lot. To pick up on a core theme of Jeremiah 29… we are to seek the welfare of EVERYONE around us – they matter to God / Christ died for them too / and we are His ambassadors to them. There is no ambiguity or excuse or indifference allowed. YOU matter – whoever YOU are, wherever YOU live.

So our commitment to proper social cohesion, proper integration of those who feel left out or who are on the margins, and sharing of community and social life, lies NOT in our being do-gooders, or in a middle class tea and cucumber mentality – but in our faithfulness to Jesus teaching and the clear direction of the Scriptures. That is why it matters. So we are not going to let the need for it to fall off our Christian agenda, whatever the political climate may be or the economic agenda prioritises. To say it again – it is a Biblical imperative to seek and promote the welfare of others… perhaps epitomised in Paul's words to the Philippians (2.3-4) … ***In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.***

The Scriptures and God himself call us to no less…

With the scriptures and the teaching of Jesus clear in our minds, let's turn to St Patrick and what he might still say to us from his famous Confession…. (well worth reading – several times! Please do!)

Para 49 . But in the hope of eternity, I safeguarded myself carefully in all things, so that they might not cheat me of my office of service on any pretext of dishonesty, and so that I should not in the smallest way provide any occasion for defamation or disparagement on the part of unbelievers.

Amongst the things that Patrick is saying to us in this Para and the Paras before and after is this. Christian integrity matters – a lot.

It is not simply enough to know what to do / say / think – but it has to be backed up by very careful attention to Godly living. This is not a popular idea, but again it is a very Biblical one. Take for example James ch 2..

20 You foolish person, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? 21 Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? 22 You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. 23 And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness, and he was called God's friend. 24 You see that a person is

considered righteous by what they do and not by faith alone. [26] As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

Christian people in this land are exceptionally good at analysing a problem! How often do we hear the phrase – we must do this or that / must learn from this or must make real progress on that… We so often know what we should do, but for a variety of reasons, fear being chief amongst them – we do not do…And I hope that as Presbyterian Moderator I may be allowed to quote those wonderful words of the General Confession

Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent; According to thy promises declared unto mankind In Christ Jesus our Lord. And grant, O most merciful Father, for his sake; That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life, To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.

A godly, righteous and sober life to the glory of God's holy name. Not the product of analysis, but of action flowing from proper understanding of Christ and the cross. Not the product of simply trying harder, (to quote the strap line of one car rental company), but by the power of the Holy Spirit of God; not because we wish to be politically correct, but because we want to honour the Christ who loved us enough to die for us.

We, quite rightly, emphasise the need for godly living in terms of personal morality and along the lines of the Ten Commandments. I want to suggest here this morning, that one expression of godly living is in fact our commitment to good relationships across whatever divides there are in our community.

If I can put it like this… evangelism that is selective about whom we wish to reach is dishonouring to God. Ministry that takes little or no cognisance of the hurt of others is surely not carried out in the name of Jesus. Anything that in the smallest way

provides any occasion for defamation or disparagement on the part of unbelievers (to quote Patrick again) is to be abhorred – and brought well within the ambit of the General Confession….

We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us. But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us, miserable offenders. Spare thou those, O God, who confess their faults. Restore thou those who are penitent;

It is not for me to identify where any follower of Christ has erred in terms of the gospel calling to the building of community relations. I would not dare to do so, for I am not standing in the shoes of anyone else, nor know their pain.

But I do know that **I** have left undone those things that I ought to have done; and have done those things that I ought not to have done. And I need to repent of keeping my head down when it should have popped up. I need to repent of the times when my attitude has been closer to that of the disciples of Jesus who wanted the Samaritans wiped out, than to the mind of Jesus who sat down to show the love of God to those very same people. I need to repent of wanting the blessings of salvation in Christ, without facing up to the cost of discipleship – and Patrick knew plenty about that…

So today, as we continue to celebrate the memory of St Patrick in this cathedral and in this town, can we move away from thinking of snakes and various shades of green to this one big Scriptural theme of the active building of relationships across this community – indeed this island - in the name of and for the honour of Jesus Christ – doing it with integrity and courage and tenacity – and looking forward with Patrick to what he himself saw as God's glorious reward and wrote of in these truly uplifting words at the end of his Confession…

We, on the other hand, shall not die, who believe in and worship the true sun, Christ, who will never die. No more shall he die who has done Christ's will, but will abide for ever just as Christ abides for ever, who reigns with God the Father Almighty and with the Holy Spirit before the beginning of time and now and for ever and ever. Amen.