

**Sermon preached at the Eucharist for
The General Synod of the Church of Ireland
by the Right Reverend Paul Colton, Bishop of Cork
on Saint Matthias' Day, 14th May, 2002**

Embargo Tuesday 14th May 2002 at 7.30 p.m.

The switch to Tuesday night for one central Act of Worship for the General Synod gives the Episcopal preacher an impossible task. Previously, on the eve of Synod, he might utter something prophetic in anticipation of the days ahead. Now he has to take into account the day of business that has already transpired. Prediction last week was no easy feat.

Knowing that there was a predominance of liturgical material – bills and resolutions – for handling this year, I took pot luck with a text from the Acts of the Apostles:

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)

Rather than go down that road I turn to some rallying words of Jesus in today's Gospel of Saint Matthias' Day:

I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends" (John 15.9)

Friendship with Jesus is not upward mobility – servants getting notions. Rather, we meet in General Synod as those servants whom Jesus calls friends – those who are loved: chosen (startling and humbling as we know that to be) by the one who sacrificed himself for us, who chooses us to go and to love as he has loved.

For that small group of followers of Jesus, meeting, as we do, between Ascension and Pentecost, it was a bitter sweet time. Their resurrection meetings with the Master had given them strength. They had come out from behind locked doors to proclaim the wonderful joy of the resurrection.

Once again he had left them. It was down to business. As so often on the agenda, the first item was a problem. Hanging over them like a cloud was the pain of the treachery and suicide of their one-time friend, Judas. They discussed what was needed: someone who had journeyed with Jesus from the start; someone who would witness to the resurrection. They prayed, and drew lots to choose from among two who met the criteria – Joseph called Barsabbas and Matthias. So, the nucleus of the guarantors of the resurrection tradition was re-constituted. The work could go on.

At that time of hiatus, it was the resurrection of Jesus and the desire to announce the good news which pushed them on. The Church moves on in the power of the resurrection, even when confronted by great challenges.

General Synod is a business gathering of those who celebrate a common pilgrimage in the resurrection faith. We meet, this year, when as far as many are concerned, a cloud hangs over Christianity worldwide. Walk around town in a clerical collar, sit in a taxi, get on a bus, listen to the radio, or read the papers and you know this to be so.

I'm not only referring to the criminal behaviour towards children. More generally a sense of impotence, helplessness and uncertainty about the institutional future of the Church weighs on many minds.

Those of us who do not yet feel especially burdened in this way, would be foolish to disregard those who do. Whether in rural and city centre areas with diminishing numbers and the responsibility of buildings; or in suburbia with the advance of secularisation, the question remains "how do we gear ourselves up for the future and what will become of the Church in the days ahead?"

Like Mark Wallander's millennium depiction of the vulnerable human Jesus - *Ecce Homo* – standing at the edge of that controversial empty plinth surrounded by the representations of the mighty and powerful in London's Trafalgar Square, there is a sense that the Church too is perched precariously on the edge of a ravine: a wilderness, where, as our forbears in faith discovered, God is.

It is stating the obvious to say that, as far as many on the street are concerned, the Church is not well placed in society, at this particular juncture, to level criticism, however prophetic, at other institutions. Rather, this is undoubtedly a time for humble introspection: not a reflection self-preoccupied and stagnated by fear; but to mobilise a forward-looking advance for the sake of the Gospel.

The question then for us, as for those who met to choose Matthias, facing challenges and journeying in a world of menacing realities, on the precipice of uncertain times; and at the same time infused with the joy of the resurrection, must surely be, how are we to be the Church today? Some theologians even speak of our need "to reshape the Church".

We should be encouraged that much of what we do does not need to be refashioned: joy in worship; a deepening of prayer; listening to God; conscientious pastoral care; faithfulness in handing on what we have received; an incarnational relevance in our engagement with society; a solidarity with those who are being crucified today; and a commitment to the moving back of barrier stones of division. These marks of faithfulness are fulfilled week in week out by people up and down the country who respond to God's call to them, but who get no further mention or accolade, as neither Matthias nor Joseph Barsabbas did in the Scriptures. We should have confidence, under God, that much of what we are doing is potently enduring.

The other reality is that this world of flux is for many an age of nightmare. The Church is indicted by the stark reality that, paradoxically (as we would see it), people are finding elsewhere, what very often they are not finding, but ought to be able to find in Christianity: the generosity of God's grace; a warm embrace, a shoulder to lean on during the journey; the way of tolerance; an openness to difference, and the splendid variety in human creation; a breaking down of barriers (most of them made by us), all inspired by the ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

There is an increasing disjunction between our way of being the Church and many in society. This requires a strategic and proactive response. Those eleven at their meeting had a gap to fill: they chose Matthias. Over the centuries, filling the gaps, reacting to situations has served us well – until now. In today's vastly changed circumstances, this approach will no longer do.

Curiously some of the things I believe we need to do in response to the contemporary scenario sound distinctly “un-post-modern”. But why should that surprise us? We still proclaim that the Christian way of journeying in community together towards the mystery of God, as embodied in Jesus Christ, is, contrary to what post-modernists would say, an overarching narrative which makes sense of all.

One obvious starting point is a renewed focus on theology, a forum, even, for engaging in theological reflection which mirrors the pursuit of understanding in faith that already happens individually and locally. We have committees for most things under the sun, reflecting, theologically, but only in their own area. There is, at the institutional centre of the Church’s life, no Faith and Order group whose distinctive assignment is to reflect on the things of God, our journey in faith; to help us in our understanding of emerging theological trends and formal statements, such as that from the Primates’ meeting recently about the Doctrine of God. This suggestion was made once before in 1997 by the then Strategic Planning Group but was not pursued. Such a forum would help us all to see that modernising Christianity, and the pursuit of a new syntax for faith, does not involve abandoning the enduring truths of that faith.

Then, let’s be clear that we can’t simply walk away from what we have inherited. It’s a naïve cliché to talk surgically about the need to move from maintenance to mission. We can’t just jettison everything that has been handed on to us. We do need to find ways to do our maintenance in a more missionary-minded way. I’m sure we all know deep down that we need to strike a healthier balance between buildings and structures on the one hand, and people and ministry on the other. A restored equilibrium of our investment of time, talents and resources would shift in favour of people and ministry.

When we do evangelism, we tend to think of going out in order to bring people in. So often the unarticulated goal is to recruit people so that they will become the guarantors of our tradition and espouse our way of being Church and its sub-culture. Don’t we need now to make ourselves available in surprising places; to go and be there in Christ’s name and in that wilderness journey to discover whatever it may mean to be Church. The end result may not be more people in pews, on Select Vestries and with Freewill Offering Envelopes, but rather, it may well be models of Church existing in parallel with Church as we traditionally know it.

I hear clergy talking about the gap between what they thought they were being ordained for and what they are actually doing. We need to find ways to free clergy to be what they are called to be. More than that, we’re busy moving clergy around from gap to gap in a creaking parochial system with no endgame in sight, when instead we ought perhaps, as part of a rethink, to be liberating a proportion of personnel for ministry in those surprising places.

All of this would involve a significant release of resources. Dare I call it “prudent extravagance”? I was greatly struck by something the RTE Economist George Lee said recently “If businesses are to survive in this radically new era, management are going to have to move away from optimising capital to optimising people.” Our tomorrow will depend on how we will optimise people, clerical and lay: putting them at the centre; equipping and nurturing them for their pilgrimage; resourcing them to do the work of the Gospel. This is precisely where the ministry of General Synod and Representative Church Body dovetail.

The limitation of our denominational resources should be one of the impulses that causes us to look again at the ecumenical imperative of the Gospel; at the potential for sharing resources and doing together with other churches what can and ought to be done together. There are other friends of Jesus out there journeying in the same wilderness.

At the end of the day all of these things are only human strategies. But it's appropriate to mention them, because General Synod is about the conjunction of faith and practicalities; spirituality and business. Our designs will falter if we do not continue to humble ourselves before the mystery of the living God. Our friendship with and closeness to him is the key.

In Easter Week, during a family break, we visited one of England's great churches. My children rushed to see the magnificent Easter Garden. They were enthralled and excited by it. But then a steward stepped forward and killed the joy: "Don't get too close ... " she snapped.

And that's the nub, isn't it? Who are we pushing away, holding back, failing to bring close to friendship with the risen Christ by the sort of Church we are, and by what we do?

I do not call you servants any longer... but I have called you friends" (John 15.9)

Faced with so many challenges, how are we to be faithful in our day to that friendship?