

CHURCH OF IRELAND - GENERAL SYNOD

SERMON PREACHED BY BISHOP JAMES JONES,

BISHOP OF LIVERPOOL IN ST PATRICK'S CATHEDRAL DUBLIN

ON TUESDAY, 10th May 2005

I bring you greetings from the Diocese of Liverpool and the Northern Province of the Church of England. I am particularly delighted to be in the company of Archbishop Robin who stands out in the Anglican Communion for his unique blend of pastoral and diplomatic gifts that soothe many an international difficulty. He is to the nervous system of the Anglican Communion the equivalent of a glass of good Irish whiskey! Thank you for sparing him for this important ministry. He occupies a special place in the Communion.

William Wilberforce once commented on Archbishops. And on a European tour with William Pitt said "Archbishops in England are not like archeveques in France; these last are jolly fellows of about 40 years of age, who play at billiards ... like other people .."!

The Archbishop's Presidential address and your Synod reports show how you wrestle with current social problems. The Church of Ireland is very rural as well as urban. George Herbert in his advice to Parsons on how they should preach warned them about the challenge of preaching to rural congregations:

“Sometimes he tells them stories and sayings of others, according as his text invites him; for them also men heed and remember better than exhortations, which though earnest, yet often die with the sermon, especially with country people, which are thick and heavy, and hard to raise to a point of zeal and fervency, and need a mountain of fire to kindle them.”!

My text comes from today’s Gospel John 14 15 – 17 Jesus said:

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him.”

When I was at University I used to attend Chapel on Sunday morning and sing in the Choir and in the evening attend the local Brethren Assembly. I loved the sung liturgy of the Eucharist and drank in the evangelical theology of scholarly preachers such as F F Bruce. But what stands out in my memory is being frequently challenged by elderly ladies with radiant faces who would ask us students directly and without embarrassment “Do you love Jesus?” I cannot say that we were always very comfortable with this directness! But it’s stayed with me, not least because as a Bishop, and like you, becoming more and more baptised in the business of church governance it’s disconcertingly easy to bury and neglect the essence of our faith – that simple love of Jesus.

The Gospel passage before us suggests a division in the world, or more accurately a separation from the world. Love for Jesus and experience of his Spirit of truth will set us apart from those who can neither see him, nor know him nor receive him. This is an important point and a corrective to much thinking about mission today.

There's an assumption that if only the church could get its house in order and make itself (to use a modern phrase) 'fit for purpose' the crowds would return. It overlooks the teaching and experience of Jesus, that as many will be repelled as will be attracted to him. However, much we might improve the liturgy or make the message relevant there will be those who will find him too disturbing.

I hesitate to draw attention to this. Because I do not want to let the church off the hook, to allow her any excuse for falling numbers and for lack of influence in society. I do want to see the Church 'fit for purpose'. But we have to recognise that there is such a thing as spiritual antipathy and even an antagonism towards Jesus and his Spirit of Truth.

But there's another assumption here, which I think also needs challenging, that this spiritual apathy and indifference to Jesus is always to be found in those outside the church.

I know it's a sort of advantage to wear a dog-collar because it gives people like me opportunity for certain conversations. From taxi-drivers to fellow travellers I've lost count of the number of people who've told me how they've felt little need of the church, but how they often pray, how they believe a little and how much they respect and even love the person of Jesus.

Mind you, not so long ago I was flying back from Belfast on EasyJet. I was in mufti and no dog-collar. It was a very bumpy ride – frightening, as we were buffeted about the turbulent skies. On landing the man next to me began talking “I knew it was going to be a very rough flight” he said. “Actually, I'm an airline pilot but I didn't say anything as I didn't want to frighten you. What do you do?” he then asked. “Actually” I said “I'm a priest. But I didn't tell you as I didn't want to worry you.”

I always pray for such people. Often I tell them so. I'm struck by how many are genuinely appreciative. There are so many beyond the walls of the church who are seeking, who are spiritual, so many who if you could physically introduce them to Jesus would leap at the chance.

“Those who love me” said Jesus “My Father will love them and I will love them and reveal myself to them.” The great Church of the unchurched as Gerald Priestland described them.

But there's another assumption, I'm tempted to challenge, that the loving of Jesus and his Spirit of truth is what always goes on inside the church. Would that it were so!

At this point I'm conscious of specks of wood, planks and eyes! I know that a synod has business to do. And I'm not of the school of thought that sees maintenance in competition with mission. My friends, in some hard places simply maintaining the presence is the mission. Furthermore, it's a profound and ungodly mistake to overlook the truth that administration and leadership are themselves gifts of the Spirit. But, as we know only too well, it is possible to overlay the essence, to bury the core, to encase the heart in a pericarditis of procedures, motions, party spirit, ambition, posturing, and to provide all sorts of religious reasons for such manoeuvring! And in so doing suffocate and quench that essential spirit of the love of Christ.

So when the old lady from the Brethren Assembly with the radiant face is resurrected into my imagination – and yours – and asks with simple faith “Do you love Jesus?” we can find it not just embarrassment but a shrivelling of the heart!

But the question from her, from the gospels and from our Lord himself (for it was the last question he ever uttered on the face of the earth “Do you love me?”) gets to the heart of our dilemma as a missionary church. How do we as an institution communicate the message and the life of our founder, the non-institutional Jesus?

There are many outside the institution who have no interest in joining an institution but are spiritually inquisitive and attracted to Jesus. We who are the bricks and mortar of the institution have to ask ourselves why and how and where we might nurture those beyond the walls who already delight in the garden of God's love.

But before we attempt any prescription we need to recover our own love of Jesus, to be captivated again by this revelation of the Good Father's love.

To find oneself in love with Jesus is to keep the commandment to love which is to love beyond all reason.

To find oneself in love with Jesus is to know the Spirit's indwelling presence that drives you away from that darkness of deception and into the light of truth.

To find oneself in love with Jesus is to be possessed of a passion for justice and mercy, for grace and truth, for the blessing of all creation.

To find oneself in love with Jesus is to live that life which without him is diminished, decreased and deficient.

Recently in a series of debates to mark the centenary of the Anglican Cathedral in Liverpool I debated with Baroness Warnock the relevance of Christianity to the world today. I offered her four reflections.

Jesus offers a culture of hope in a world where people are increasingly pessimistic about the future of the earth. God has a plan for a new and transformed earth.

Jesus offers a culture of justice when in spite of all the scientific and technological advances the majority still live in poverty. God has a plan for justice for the poor..

Jesus offers a culture of mercy when in an increasingly merciless society where the media are so unforgiving God has revealed a plan and made provision for our forgiveness through the Cross of Christ.

Jesus offers a culture of spiritual life and fulfilment in a world where motivation is still driven by material gain. God has the gift of life to give to the world.

Jesus is central to the Mission of God. In all our business we dare not neglect so great a truth. It is he who still poses the question "Do you love me?" and little did that old lady with the radiant face realise how deeply disturbing her question was, and to what blessings it might lead. Or, perhaps she did!

The Rt Rev James Jones, the Bishop of Liverpool

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