

Down and Dromore Diocesan Synod 28th June 2011

Presidential Address

By

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The range of material being presented at this year's Diocesan Synod has led me towards a theme which you may feel unusual for a bishop's presidential address, and even a bit risky at a time such as this: the theme of 'Money'. Usually the issues of money in the diocese are addressed simply within the Diocesan Council Report and the Diocesan accounts and, to be honest, passed over reasonably quickly, as we move on to what are, for many of us, the more interesting and exciting matters of mission. And there is something very encouraging about that, because it is possible for parishes and dioceses to become more consumed with financial issues, in an inward-looking, fearful kind of way, rather than with vision and outreach. But, if we are truly biblical Christians in the best sense possible, we will realize that money and mission always go hand in hand, and that how we use our God-given resources, including money, is always a sign of where our heart is - in the words of Jesus: *'Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also'*. That principle of money and heart applies equally to individuals, parishes and dioceses, and is a real challenge to us, not least in these years of recession.

Let me take a step back to a rather odd little issue which sparked off some of my thinking. This year, the year in which we celebrate the 400th Anniversary of the King

James Bible, is also the celebration of a very famous Synod which happened 900 years ago: The Synod of Rathbreasail. Later in the day, Fred Rankin will, I know with great joy and enthusiasm, be showing you the official, confirmed in Dublin, arms of the Diocese of Down and Dromore, with the heraldry most magnificently depicted. It is a work of art, done by hand on vellum. For some people that kind of thing 'floats their boat', for others, it may seem like looking back on rather irrelevant history. But it is not irrelevant. At the Synod of Rathbreasail in 1111, the Church of Ireland was re-organized, according to the Roman system of dioceses. The roots of the Celtic church had been more informal, with bishops moving from place to place, and the church organized around monastic foundations which were places of learning, spirituality and often evangelism, one of the most famous examples of which is Bangor in our own diocese. But, in 1111, a new system came into being. In what has been the story of our life here, the system was simply a replica of that across the water in England, transposed to Ireland. So, we had two provinces (Armagh and Cashel), and the same number of dioceses as the Church of England, which is why we have all those unnecessary cathedrals! In the dioceses were parishes, and the church covered the whole of the land. To us, this is simply now normality, but it may become increasingly abnormality in a postmodern world, which might in fact, relate much better to the more fluid Celtic model. But, the shape and structure of the Synod of Rathbreasail is how we still function. Be careful of synodical decisions - they can last a very long time!! That one has lasted 900 years!

The Synod of Rathbreasail model is often taken and theologized into the idea of the diocese being the local church. Well, in a sense it is true that the diocese is local. We serve this area covered by Down and Dromore, and that will be a key theme in the report on poverty *On our Doorstep*. But the parish or fresh expression is always, always, always the coal-face of ministry and mission, pastoral care and teaching - and *finances*, to return to the subject of money!

So, in this diocese, we believe very much that the responsibility for finances, the decisions about spending and giving, and the vast majority of resources, whether money, buildings or land, should be in the hands of the local parish. That's why we are possibly the diocese with the smallest level of financial assessment in the entire Anglican Communion in the western world! At least I have yet to meet a diocese which has a lower level of assessment on its parishes, and invite you to tell me if you know of one. The Diocese of Down and Dromore itself owns no buildings, other than half of Church House Belfast, has very little capital, and is entirely dependent on there being strong, responsible parishes out there. The healthier the parishes are, the healthier will be the diocese; the stronger the parishes are financially, the stronger will be the diocese. In a good biblical way, we all enter each year depending on the Lord's provision, with very little to fall back on, but we are not anxious, because the Lord has never let us down. As Sunday's Old Testament Reading about Abraham and Isaac reminded us: 'Jehovah Jireh: the Lord will provide', and we joyfully and assuredly trust in him for all our needs.

Might I take this opportunity to say how very grateful I am to all the parishes of this diocese, not only for paying their assessments, but for agreeing to pay by regular monthly standing order. That is a great help, and provides a good, healthy, cash-flow situation. It is our 'normality' in this diocese, and I, as your bishop, thank God for it.

Might I also paint a ball-park picture of percentages and figures. The total income of the Diocese of Down and Dromore is around £10million per annum. That is the entire income from the 77 units, which constitute the diocese, because the diocese is you and me, not something outside of you and me. Of that £10million, around 7.5% is assessed for the work of the diocese, and around 2.5% is assessed for Central Church of Ireland funds (Priorities, *Safeguarding Trust*, episcopacy, severance etc). So, around 10% is assessed on average. After that, the ball-park figure for giving to mission, developing world and other charities, is around another 10%, which means we should be giving away £1million from this diocese this year, and the actual figure is certainly coming towards

that target. The other 80% is for the mission, ministry and practicalities of running the parish. Now, I realize that, for many of you, that is not news, but for new members of Diocesan Synod and for others, you may not have heard it expressed in that kind of way, and it may provide a kind of 'standard' from which to work.

Others among you may be saying: 'But times are tough - money is hard to come by these days', and that certainly is what many charities and voluntary organizations are finding. We do live in one of the most difficult financial contexts ever. And, in those difficult times, interestingly, this Synod made a very important 'call' last year. Knowing this situation, we decided that it would not stop us from employing a new Children's Development Officer. I want to congratulate the Synod on that 'decision of faith', and we are grateful to have Julie Currie in place in that role since last January. Julie will be reporting to us on Children's Ministry in the diocese this afternoon. We also stepped out in faith with regard to the Titanic Quarter, and have seen some of the best media stories for the Church come out of that. I had the privilege of being at a dinner in the Drawing Office on Friday to launch the new Dock Church Company limited by Guarantee, which will provide and manage a chaplaincy space (probably a boat) for all the churches to use in the Titanic Quarter. Pray that that may become a reality in the next year. There will be no formal report from Chris Bennett at this year's Synod: Health and safety ruled it out!! But did you see him relaunch the Titanic on the 100th Anniversary of its launch on the News? It was even covered even covered live by BBC News24!

The other report which will be presented is on Poverty in the area covered by the Diocese of Down and Dromore and is called *On our Doorstep*. This is, I believe, a critically important report. It is a report to me, as your bishop, from the Poverty Think Tank, and one which I very much want to share with this Synod at this very critical time where different forms of poverty are becoming more prevalent and more and more evident in our community. The membership of the group can be found in the report on

your seats, and included people with a whole range of skills, experience and passions relating to the area of poverty. It was chaired by Canon David McClay, and I want to thank him and all the members for their hard and efficient work. This group was called together just before the beginning of Lent and presented their report just a couple of weeks after Easter. They also encouraged the *Drop when you Shop* Lent project which enabled parishes to use a shopping trolley during Lent to provide non-perishable foodstuffs for those in greatest need. Some parishes distributed the foodstuffs to people in need whom they knew, others found more needy local areas, and some used organizations such as foodbanks and the St Vincent de Paul to distribute the contents of the trolley. Thank you to all who participated, and I do hope this idea can be picked up at times like Advent and Lent in years to come.

I do not intend to steal the thunder of those who will present the report to us later in the Synod, and I would suggest that it may be a real blessing to all to hear something of our experiences in this area of meeting poverty during the *Conversation on the Work of God* this afternoon. It is no less than shocking when we realize, often personally, how easily we can airbrush out issues of need and poverty from our purview -the very poverty which lies open to our glance - as though it simply is not there. My own mother grew up in Sandy Row after the death of her father when she was five years of age, in abject poverty, and if it had not been for the help of the Church of Ireland at that time, almost 100 years ago now, I doubt that her mother, with three children to bring up, would have managed to exist. The other thing I want to say to myself and others is that it would be shocking if any of us who are well provided for *feigned* poverty at this time, when *real* poverty is before us, or if we closed our wallets at the very time when they needed to be opened.

At the Albany Convention, Simon Richardson, the Rector of Hillsborough, was preaching

on the Early church at the end of Acts 2. He pointed out something I had never quite heard put in as clear words before, when he said: 'The Early Church eradicated poverty in the Christian Community overnight'. 'Wow!', as the President of Ireland said when the Queen spoke in Irish! I can't quite believe it! They did it instinctively when they sold their possessions and land and brought the money to be shared among all the believers. The needs of others were more important than private possessions and goods. And in one fell swoop, the church became counter-cultural in a Christlike way. Wow! Some people have said it was like early Communism, but it was not. It was entirely voluntary, done out of a heart of love for each other and commitment to the kingdom-life of the Gospel. So the Church became a radical community *in itself*, displaying the life of the kingdom, even as it going out into the community with the faith of Christ. I long for something of the wildness of that generosity among us, the people of God, in our generation!

Something else which has fed into my thinking for this year's Diocesan Synod is reading a book published by Oxford University Press (good thorough research!) called *Pass the Plate* by Christian Smith and Michael Emerson. It is a book about financial giving in the Churches of the United States, and is sub-titled: *Why American Christians don't give away more money*. It isn't easy reading, but the straplines are brilliant and fascinating. Here is a kind of synopsis of some of them:

Most Churches in the USA teach the principle of tithing. (ie giving a tenth of all our income back to God). The principle of tithing is, of course a thoroughly biblical one, going right back to Jacob in the book Genesis. Mind you, you could say that the New Testament principle takes things even further and invites us to give *everything* back to God but the giving of everything is actually symbolized by tithing. I had an amusing experience preaching in the Christian Fellowship Church in Strandtown a few years back. The Pastor, at that time Paul Reid, welcomed me and said that I was about to speak, but that first they were to have the Offering. Then he added jokingly: 'Anglicans aren't one bit spiritual: they call it 'The

Collection’!’ When I stood up to speak I told him in no uncertain terms that it was they who were wrong and not one bit spiritual, and added the explanation: ‘If everyone here has given a tenth of all they have to God, it is an *offering*. Up to that it is just a *collection* of the tithe that we already owe him’. Paul whispered: ‘Will you say that at all the services?!’ Of all churches, we, the Church of Ireland who historically took tithes from others, should know the importance of tithing ourselves. But, *Passing the Plate* discovers:

The average Church member in the US actually gives less than 1% of their income.

So, there is a total disjunction between what the churches (and the scriptures) theoretically teach and what actually happens. That is serious. Many of the parishes in the diocese kindly send me magazines, and at certain stages of the year they may include the giving, sometimes by number, sometimes by name. I find reading most of them thoroughly depressing. The level of individual giving is sometimes quite shocking, and what is more shocking is that it appears acceptable. Now I realize that many givers are entirely nominal members, but even taking that into account, we need to set a much higher, proportionate biblical standard in many of our parishes for those who are committed believers. That one change would entirely transform many church situations. The next discovery of this book which struck me is this:

Those who are rich give a smaller percentage than those who are poor: Sometimes, a much smaller percentage. It was ever thus so, you might say, since the widow and her mite, and the rich young ruler who couldn’t give up his wealth to follow Jesus. The truth is that the richer we get, the more attached we are inclined to come to our money, sometimes even as a kind of plaything. And the richer we are, the bigger is the amount the Lord is asking us to give. And that amount, that proportion of our income, will seem extravagant, unnecessary, far, far, far too much. The next discovery I noted is this:

People do not give more because they believe they do not have enough disposable income. That is quite honestly what many of the people surveyed in the States believed. But the reality was that they had more disposable income than 20 years previously, when they were able to give proportionately at a higher level. The reality is that they felt that more of their money was needed for other things. We can all do that very easily.

People do not give because they have no sense that the Church will do anything vital or important with their money, and to use it wisely. Truth is, we all want to know what our money is achieving. That is why giving often rockets in a church where there is a project, or a mission focus, or a community involvement or an evangelistic outreach. Of course, the ordinary costs need to be covered, but if people are only giving to keep the machine running, they will probably give only what is absolutely necessary, rather than giving generously. Churches need to use their money purposefully, and extra money is not just to store away for the proverbial rainy day (though a wee bit of that is very helpful) where 'moth and rust doth corrupt and thieves break through and steal'.

Well now, where does all of this thinking about money come in to land? Answer: Here in the Diocesan Synod. And why? Because *you*, perhaps unwittingly, *have been chosen to lead this Diocese practically and spiritually in the ways of Jesus Christ.* You are chosen to give a lead! That is a high calling! Because of that high calling, you, the 300 or so members of this synod, can transform the whole life of this diocese, starting with decisions here and now. Here are some of the things I am asking of you, as your bishop:

First, non-financially, I am asking all of you to be at the Bishop's Bible Week in the Jethro Centre from 22-25 August, when John Hughes will be speaking from the lives of Elijah and Elisha about *Leadership that Transforms.* We as leaders need to be formed and reformed by the Word of God, so that we can give a truly spiritual lead in our local situations as we prepare for a new season's work.

But, with regard to money, here goes:

Decide here and now to give a tenth of all you have to the work of the Kingdom of God. Write down, with no-one looking, what your regular monthly income is. Now, divide by ten... before or after tax, I don't care! If we give a lead in this in our parishes, there is a spiritual principle which says we will find blessing. You see another thing discovered in that book is that many of us don't want to be outwitted so that we find ourselves giving more than what we think is our fair share! See what God can do in his provision, and see what God can do in opening the windows of heaven and pouring out his blessing. And a time of recession is the very time to do this, because it will allow us to respond to the needs of the poor, and the poor will also have the joy of giving. I suggest that we give half of our tithe directly to the church and half to other missional and charitable interest we may have an investment in.

Lead your church leaders to do likewise. This should be almost like ripples in a pond. We choose to give proportionately, then we persuade those on our Select Vestries and others in leadership in our parishes. We create a biblical normality, and pass it on to others.

Review your church giving. Not on the basis of 'Give a little more', nor on the basis of asking unbelievers to 'keep the church going' but on the basis of discipling Christians in the principles of proportionate giving so that the vision of the church can be fulfilled. You may be interested to know that *CREED* is, this coming year, piloting a new programme called *Pro-Vision*, to help parishes develop their financial giving in the present climate, so that their vision can be fulfilled. There is a *CREED* stand where you can pick up information about this.

Develop a spirit of generosity and plenty. One of the things I have noticed over the years is that growing churches become generous churches, or maybe it's the other way round- generous churches become growing churches. The old

Communion Service reminded us to say often those words from *2 Corinthians*: 'The Lord loveth a cheerful giver' Not a bad starting point. I do my own giving through Charities Aid Foundation which gives me a check book and recovers tax on all my tithe, and one of the most joyful experiences I have is to discover that money has accumulated and I can give it away with a glad heart.

Enable your church to ask what God is calling it to do in and for the community.

That is what stops finances being simply what keeps the church going, and that is what energizes churches and opens people's pockets: that fact that we are agents of the Kingdom of God in a transformative way in the places we are set.

That is, you will be glad to know, all I plan to say about money. Indeed, it was all I had planned to say in my Address, but I feel I must add something about the profoundly shocking situation in East Belfast last week. The tragedy of this situation lies at a whole series of levels, and I simply want to chart some of them:

The deep sectarianism which still lies at the heart of Ulster society. It has been said that we are a society with a shared history but not a shared memory. That will be exposed in the Commemorations of the next ten years, I hope for good and not evil. But it was seen, unwittingly last week, when we heard reports of the first night of violence from two different perspectives on the media. Both perspectives were true, both sides said what they had seen, but neither had seen a wide enough picture, which included the perspective of the other.

The power of paramilitaries which puts fear into the hearts of ordinary people and seeks to control communities through fear and intimidation. These same paramilitaries claim to have disarmed, but still seek to control people, not least in their own communities, by fear. It was quite shocking to hear so often last week that people were afraid to say what was really happening. It is also deeply disturbing to see young people often in their mid-teens being drawn into the adrenalin rush of violence and cynically used by older men; and we ought all to say how much we

abhor and reject the creation of new paramilitary murals in East Belfast, contributing to an environment of hatred rather than healing. There is, in my view, an unheard voice in East Belfast, which wants to say to the paramilitaries, 'Get off our backs!'

The importance of the government recognizing that they must act to build a different kind of community. That includes education, employment, social facilities, and so on. And the Church will have a role in this. Far from what may have been thought, the churches were highly involved in trying to help in this situation, through from pastoral care of terrified old people, to re-directing many of the young people away from the attractive scene of tension. But I want to say something very strongly. There is a real and absolute priority in moving forward the Shared Future agenda. OFMDFM asked everyone to respond to their document *Cohesion, Sharing and Integration*, and the Church of Ireland did - in a robust and critical way. Eight months later, I still cannot find even the contents of the responses on the OFMDFM website, let alone any analysis of them, or any sense of direction for the future. The government is dragging its heels at a time when we desperately need to build a different kind of community, especially in interface areas. I for one am not prepared to accept a vision of an ongoing world in Northern Ireland with two parallel universes, because parallel universes will always have interfaces, and are never capable of resolving our problems.

Finally, might I say how grateful I am to the local clergy for their engagement with the situation. It has not been easy, not least for The Revd John Cunningham, just instituted as Rector of Ballymacarrett the Sunday before it broke out. The Church of Ireland is committed to inner city areas, and will continue to develop its ministry in the heart of East Belfast.