

Primus Charge General Synod 2016

We meet on this St Columba's Day. Columba important for me as a connection between Ireland and Scotland. He is etched on the back of my pectoral cross. He was born at Gartan in Donegal. which for me is holy ground. The gospel for today calls us to mission - to go and make disciples

In response, it's tempting to reach for one of those neat patterns - that we are called to move from being a gathered church with a culture of membership to being a discipleship church with a culture of growth. My daily experience of working with the clergy and people of our congregations is that we need to face that challenge if we are - to use another seductively neat pattern - to survive and thrive. In the church provincially and nationally, the issues are more complex. Increasingly we recognise the need for a narrative - a story which we tell about ourselves and our life with God. Sometimes that narrative is quite specific - for example when it deals with the vocation and ministry in the next generation. At other times, it explores what it means to be a church with national presence in Scotland - about local ministry and national structures, about ecumenical partnerships and our understanding of the changing face of Scotland.

I cannot remember a period where the context in which we try to shape the narrative in which we live, lovingly serve and pursue our mission has been more complex. And the phrase which leaps out from our readings today and speaks to that reality comes from St Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians - when he says that we should 'please God who tests our hearts'

Let me explain why that phrase is so telling to me.

Those who look in on our General Synod this year want to know about our proposed canonical change in respect of marriage. I say to the journalists that what really matters is how we address this as a United community of faith. If we make a decision to move in this way, what do we say to those who do not and cannot agree? Can we continue to express the love and the unity to which God calls us?

You will be aware that during the year we have experienced deep pain in relationships which are very close to us and which matter greatly - in the Anglican Communion and in our relationships with the Church of Scotland and the Church of England. As we express our distress, we need explore where we ourselves may have contributed and allow that self-understanding to shape our response - pleasing God who tests our hearts.

We are approaching the EU Referendum. This is part of an interlinked series of issues which leads all the way back to Scotland. Rage against political elites and political establishments is a worldwide phenomenon. In this Referendum campaign, it encourages a focus on migration and immigration. This threatens to take us out of the European Union and, if it does so, may in turn have profound effects in the unfolding story of the new Scotland and the future of the United Kingdom.

The linked story of the plight of refugees and migrants is one of the great challenges of our times. Giles Fraser has tellingly written of the way in which we use our borders to protect our economic privilege. It is not the wish of many people in Scotland that we should do this. Maybe that is because in Scotland and Ireland our practice in the 19th century and beyond was to migrate - from Ireland to lowland Scotland - from Scotland and Ireland to America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. I've stood in Waipu in the North Island of New Zealand, Five shiploads - 800 people - from the Highlands went there in the 1850's. I've stood in the museum on Ellis Island in New York Harbour - looked at the lists of migrants from Ballyjamesduff and every other town land in Ireland and then looked out towards the skyscrapers of Manhattan where they hoped to build new lives, And we didn't just export those for whom there was no other hope - my much more recent experience is that we let the best and the brightest go so that they could develop other people's societies leaving an impoverishment of leadership in our own.

We are looking at a time of extraordinary turbulence in both church and society. And what might it mean 'to please God who tests our hearts'

It means being faithful to the Gospel, of course. We are not politicians. Our roots are down in different soil. There must be truth and sometimes that is painful for it will need to be the truth about ourselves. And we must respond to others as God has responded to us - that means with generosity, grace and forgiveness. For we live with the hope that what has gone wrong can be redeemed within the loving forgiveness of God. There is a tendency in many of us - we'll certainly in me - which seeks to win the battles and to reduce complex and multi-layered issues to the kind of simplicities which admit of win-lose answers.

I believe that our calling is to witness to something much bigger and more generous than that. I think we are called to exercise compassion, to pursue justice and to honour difference. I pray that in this General Synod we may witness to that expression of our faith in Jesus Christ who suffered and died for the overcoming of sin and death. May we please God who tests our hearts

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