Strictly embargoed 15:00 hrs

17 September 2021

Address by the Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (PCI), at Union Theological College, Belfast, during 'On these steps', PCI's special event to mark the role played by its College in hosting the Northern Ireland Parliament 100 years ago, and to mark the centenary of the creation of Northern Ireland, and the partition of Ireland.

Stepping Forward

I would like you to imagine a potter sitting at a wheel. They have a job to do – the production of pots. If they are to be successful, some basic things are needed, in addition to their own technical ability in the craft. They need to have the right kind of clay and glaze, just as they need satisfactory equipment – such things go without saying. But at the heart of the potter's skill, before the wheel turns or the clay is thrown; before they get their hands dirty, there needs to be a dream – call it a vision of what they are about to create.

Perhaps they already know what they are trying to do, because their task is to reproduce more of what has already been done in the past. There are already examples of identical pots on the shelf, and their day's work is simply to add to their number. But just maybe, this is a potter who has been given a more challenging commission. Theirs is not to replicate what they have known, but to reimagine the very concept of the clay pot – to reconceive what it means to work in this medium, stretching it to its limits, finding new forms never before achieved. They are going to reinvent the pot. For such a time as this, the potter needs to be not only a skilled worker in clay, but a prophet.

In her whimsical short novel The Last Resort, Jan Carson introduces her readers to a very Northern Irish group of people huddled in their caravans on the north coast, somewhere near Ballycastle. The wind is howling over the cliff tops outside, and the story describes the sometimes hilarious interactions between the people who hunker down on holiday in such a place.

Among them are the religious and irreligious types; an elderly couple including a husband caring for his wife who has dementia and is prone to wander perilously close to the cliff edge; a caravan secretly (and illegally) crammed full of migrants from different countries, for whom the alternative is sleeping rough on the streets; and a man – a former RUC officer - who is consumed with the memory of his daughter who died in an IRA car bomb explosion, which was meant for him. It doesn't sound like promising material for a holiday read – but in the curious way of this place, and despite the awfulness of the lived experience of many of the characters, we chuckle and smile – maybe because we know someone who is just like that, or perhaps find ourselves looking in the mirror. The clay of this place is a unique mix.

On December 9th 1968 Northern Ireland's then Prime Minister Terence O'Neill gave his famous impassioned plea for unity and a foreboding warning about the future, declaring that "Ulster stands at the crossroads". The context was the civil rights movement, and the package of reforms tabled by O'Neill with backing (or perhaps more likely) pressure from Harold Wilson in London. This package of reforms was welcomed by many but not considered sufficient by some others. The events, including Burntullet Bridge in the following month are well documented as "the spark that lit the prairie fire".

A literal crossroads is a place of convergence, with numerous pathways leading to it. The many roads or laneways which wend their way to this point of meeting have their own characteristics. They are like little micro-cultures – we usually call them townlands - which discover each other where the six roads end, or the six miles cross.

A cross roads may be a place of conjunction where decisions are forced from us, to continue on, to change direction, or to turn back. But in the context of Irish life a cross roads is primarily a place of meeting, where people intermingle, deals are done, and lives are enriched.

The centenary of the formation of Northern Ireland and consequently of the United Kingdom in its current form is being marked this year by necessity in multiple ways. Communities are arriving at the cross roads from different places, and are regarding each other, sometimes with generational suspicion, across the way. There are those who lament the creation of the border on this island, seeing it as an act of political compromise undermining the cause of Irish unity, and condemning this island to a further century of violence and sectarian polarisation.

There are others who will wish to celebrate the partition of Ireland as a triumph of statecraft; a necessary act of political expedience to honour the democratic wishes of the majority in these six counties. For years, indeed generations, we have lived life in this place at the cross roads, knowing well, these differences of vision, and living with them. We shook hands, did deals and got along fine until we started to talk about “this”. When “this” comes to the fore, as from time to time it inevitably does, we stand apart from each other, only occasionally summoning up the courage to extend a hand of friendship across the road. When the moment passes, we heave a collective sigh of relief, and retrace our steps back to the safety of our own clan, up the road.

Now of course this is a caricature. Let me illustrate both sides of this from my own experience as a boy growing up in Lurgan. I remember as a young lad meeting a crowd of other young lads while walking into town of a Saturday morning. Lurgan was and still is, a sadly divided place, and what I am about to tell you happened routinely.

So instead of greeting each other affably, talking about the football and getting up to some harmless mischief together as you might expect a group of youngsters to do, these lads wanted to know if I or my older brother could say a Hail Mary – we couldn't, because it wasn't a thing we Presbyterians learned in church or at school.

Even if we had learned it off just to get past them, they would ask another question, and listen carefully to hear how we pronounced the letter "H" – would it be as I have just done, or would it be "Haitch" – a sure sign of which road you walked on. Being unable to satisfactorily pass this shibboleth, we would get a smack or a thump or a kicking before continuing on our way to buy the Hotspur and a quarter pound of rhubarb rock at Jonny McDonald's shop.

Perhaps the deepest tragedy about this story is that we thought nothing of it. That's what happened when you went to the crossroads, and if you were brought up here, this story won't come as any sort of surprise – it's how things were, but of course it wasn't the whole story either. I learned to sail at about this time, and the Enterprise dingy I raced twice a week on Lough Neagh was shared with my mate John, who said Haitch to my H, and we won races together, and for that glorious summer in 1974, were an unbeatable pair. If we thumped each other, it was out of delight on crossing the finishing line ahead of the pack. Life at the crossroads is a curious mixture of simple delight, ancient suspicion and deep-seated fear.

Writing in the Irish Times at the end of August this year, the columnist Fintan O'Toole quotes the 19th century French thinker, Ernest Renan, who when asked the question "What is a nation?" answered in part that it is a collective exercise in amnesia. He quotes: "Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation". Violence and brutality often mark the formation of nations, and Ireland has been no different. The adolescent slap or the thumping of the unwelcome visitors passing through your part of town, all too easily becomes the stuff of automatic weapons and bombs, of institutional hatreds and a DNA of outright rejection of the other. This is no way to do society. That is not what crossroads are for.

So to the gospel question which must lie at the heart of this for me as a pastor – but even more basically, as a human person. Does the gospel provide a basis for hope for the future as we stand at this crossroads, regarding each other across the way, 100 years on?

There are some things we will never be able to forget, and indeed which we must try not to forget. Victims of violence who have lost loved ones still seek justice, however unlikely such recourse through the courts might be. To remove that from them is to remove hope, and is antithetical to the gospel which unites both love and justice in the person of Jesus Christ.

It could be enough for some that the remedy they crave will show on the balance of probabilities, that such and such a one perpetrated this act, even if the prospect of conviction in a criminal court "beyond all reasonable doubt" is now beyond our system of justice to deliver.

At Christmas we celebrate the coming of Jesus among us as an act of incarnational love. He reaches out to us across the great divide and walks with us. But at Easter we mark and commemorate something quite different. We face head on, the sacrifice of Jesus as an act of justice, the just for the unjust that we the culpable, might be acquitted and go free. At once in light of both Christmas and Easter, of love and justice, the horrible memories which have scarred us may be reborn and reframed, not that they go away, or that they don't matter but that these memories are, like a lump of clay sent spinning on the potter's wheel to be re-formed into something new and even life-affirming.

Reconciliation – repeatedly affirmed in statements and agreements from both churches and governments in the past - does not suffer from amnesia. Reconciliation is not soft or forgetful. Setting the past aside as if it didn't happen is no basis or foundation for healing. Reconciliation that has the grit and grip to re-write a life is that which names a wrong as the wrong that it is, whether perpetrated by the state or by an agent of terror. Such naming and then acknowledgement of a wrong presents a choice to those at the table.

If they have the courage and good sense and moral backbone to repent of it, to lament that it ever took place, to say so and face the guilt that lies at its heart, then a door is opened to a new future. Reconciliation that grows to fruitfulness in this precious soil produces a brand of person that the world cannot ignore, and the critics cannot answer. Theirs is a deep-seated heroism, at peace not only with themselves, but incredibly, with their enemies. As the Psalmist puts it, “You prepare a table before me, in the presence of my enemies.” God’s vision for us is that we, friends and enemies alike, can sit together and eat together at the table.

The people who get this are deeply impressive and unforgettable when we encounter them, and we on this island have a disproportionately large number of them to celebrate. Some of their stories are told in the book, *Considering Grace*, which adds to a narrative involving heroes from all traditions here.

But reconciliation is not limited to the tragic trauma of such stories. It is determinedly resisting the drift to polarize. I wish I could say that the church had done this well – there have been solid examples, but it isn’t the headline that people will take away when they think of us. The Church Leaders’ Group (Ireland) is one place where I, along with the Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic Archbishops, the Methodist President and the President of the Irish Council of Churches, find ourselves regularly in the same room, praying together, and looking to the future. We honour each other, work hard to listen to each other’s perspectives and acting in this way have carved a path to mark this 100th anniversary.

An example of this is their presence here today, for which I thank them. The statement we drafted together which was released on St Patrick’s Day earlier this year has been followed by a podcast series soon to be released, and there are plans for a service in Armagh which we have jointly organised to mark this moment. These steps were not taken by accident but reflect a deep commitment on the part of each of us to relationships on this island which acknowledge and respect difference, but stubbornly refuse to allow those polarities to break our friendship, our fellowship, and our ability to work together.

Politically, this is perpetually challenging. The power-sharing arrangements which exist here, while not by any means perfect, are precious. They are a table around which we will find political friends and foes, and that in itself is a prophetic instrument which we need to protect. That said, the right to argue for an important principle belongs to all our elected representatives – that is after all, why we elected them. We have long supported the existence of devolved governance here, and lament the use of those institutions as a bargaining chip, or indeed the bypassing of those institutions by governments for reasons of their own. Such actions do not serve us well, or build confidence for the future.

Jesus' reaching out to us at Christmas and Easter happened

- before we asked him,
- before we even thought we should ask him,
- before we had even heard his name.

A New Testament writer described it like this: "This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us, and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins". He then continued, "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another". Loving someone who has hurt you, or offended you, or taken something precious from you is not a natural thing to do. It has little to do with feelings or sentiment. In all probability it will not even be something we want to do. And here, in this Scripture it is not presented as if it were, or as if it were easy. It is presented as a "so what" statement. Since God has loved you in your wretched condition, you ought now to love others.

This radical kind of reconstructed relationship is nourished when we know our indebtedness – that we ourselves are loved unconditionally, as God in Christ has done. Knowing this, we can begin to reproduce it elsewhere.

Eugene Peterson, a biblical scholar and pastor is best known for his contemporary paraphrase of the Bible. This is how he presents God's manifesto of Christian love to us from First Corinthians 13:

Love never gives up.
Love cares more for others than for self.
Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.
Love doesn't strut,
Doesn't have a swelled head,
Doesn't force itself on others,
Isn't always "me first,"
Doesn't fly off the handle,
Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,
Doesn't revel when others grovel,
Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,
Puts up with anything,
Trusts God always,
Always looks for the best,
Never looks back,
But keeps going to the end.

Some people wonder what the church is about – what it has to offer, what it brings to the table. This is what it brings to the table. A tangible, workable power to unpick the worst damage that the thoughtless arrogance of imperialism or the blind folly of terrorism has imposed upon us. What it brings to the table is the possibility that old enemies might become family.

So the potter's wheel is turning. Who are the potters? Our politicians?

Unquestionably they need to get their hands dirty in the clay, but I suspect they know this, and that is why they sought office in the first place. And let me say this to them. We support you in your work – and that support transcends the divisions of party or even ideals you may espouse. You have done a brave thing in seeking election. Having succeeded at the ballot box, your calling is to courageously pursue the connections beyond your own townland at the crossroads, so that deals can be done and all of us benefit. We back you in that.

But the rest of us are potters too. In a thousand different ways, by our own attitudes and examples, we can model a better way for the next generations to follow. So what is the potter's vision when considering that future?

Northern Ireland's perception of itself has suffered from a deep and bogus theological conceit from its earliest days, particularly from within my tradition, or parts of it – that it was a bulwark against Rome's inexorable advance, that it, and the Protestant people within it were especially anointed by God, that like Israel, it understood itself to be exceptional in the overarching economy of God.

I contend that we are no more nor less exceptional than the next sinner in line, that our calling is not to repeat the mistakes of imperial hubris, but to live, as the prophet Micah makes plain, in such a way that we would; "…act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God." This is not a manifesto for "a Protestant State for a Protestant people", but a shared land which belongs to all of us, and to none of us, since in truth we are merely tenants here of the one who made it, and he is a great and just Landlord, and in his hands, this ought to be a land of plenty, not of famine.

North, south, east and west on these islands present us with a web of opportunities to grow – economically, culturally, spiritually, if we have the vision for it. In a post-Brexit, Protocol environment some of this has been made more complicated, but if anything it has been made more urgent. We must work tirelessly to sort out the new configurations of our cultural, commercial and spiritual connections. No shortcuts. No quick fixes. No buck-passing. Just gritty determination to get it done.

A multi-cultural Ireland, north and south is a blessing to us, and we need not be fearful of it. The stories of those who have left everything behind in their homelands to be part of our story in this, their new homeland, need to be heard, and they will enrich us, just as we will bless them, whether they learn English to say H or Haitch. I can tell you with confidence from the churches, that we are the better because of the multitude of heart languages spoken when we come to God in prayer.

Whatever a new Ireland resembles, it will not be because someone was victorious, while another was defeated. If it looks like that, it won't be a new Ireland.

We as Presbyterians don't always agree with others. We have a strong dissenting tradition which extends back over four centuries in this place. You could say we're "thran", and I'll take that as a compliment. But I hope we are not so stubborn that we would wish to exclude anyone; that we are respectful in face of difference; that we recognise the important benefits of a shared space, and that our vision for the future means that a Presbyterian can feel equally at home in the Gaeltacht, as they can in the Braid – and equally (with hope for the future) call both of them "home" (or perhaps that should be "hame"?).

Ends.

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