



CHURCH LEADERS' GROUP (IRELAND)
*A service of Reflection & Hope
to mark
the Centenary of the partition of Ireland
and the formation of Northern Ireland*



St Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral
Thursday, 21 October 2021

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Sermon by Rev Dr Sahr Yambasu
President of the Methodist Church in Ireland

May I preach faithfully in the name of God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

I. I bring you good news!

We meet on the hill and in the Cathedral of St. Patrick's. This is a place where the name of Christ and the values of love, acceptance and embrace were preached, the seeds of hope for enemies becoming friends were sown, and reconciliation not just talked about but enacted.

Lest we forget, before he became Patron Saint of Ireland, Patrick was a slave here. Here, he suffered an intentional act of violence. And, here, he was made to feel a little less human than those who enslaved him. And yet it is to this place, land, and people he returned to spend the rest of his life enabling the Irish to find an alternative way of living in solidarity one with the other.

Patrick had every reason to hate the Irish and seek for vengeance. But he didn't. Instead, he forgave and was forgiven. Consequently, the history of this place could be summarised in one word: GRACE - unmerited concern for the good of the other.

For us Christians, grace is a gift. That gift is a person. Jesus Christ is his name. He is the gift of God to St. Patrick. It is that gift that made him return to Ireland not to hold the past against the people of Ireland, but to hold before them the possibility of a mutually enhanced future: a future devoid of recriminations and unjust relationships; and a future imbued with and infused by grace.

I tell you the truth. Grace alone can set free the people of this Island from enslavement by the past. The result of the outworking of grace is forgiveness. And forgiveness is releasing others and oneself from a corroding past into a liberating future. This is the good news I bring you: that the grace of Jesus is available to you, to me, to all of us, today.

II. I bring you good news!

Today, we are marking a point in our history. We have come a long way – not just a century but centuries. During that time people have cared for one another and made efforts to build community. For this we give thanks. But we have also been blighted by sectarian divisions, terrible injustices, destructive violence, and by win-lose political attitudes. And for this, we have cause to lament. So, this service provides us with an opportunity to give thanks and, also, lament; to imagine what could be, and to choose the way forward that can be mutually beneficial.

It was only recently that I learnt that the first antislavery voice out of Ireland is that of Patrick. Patrick's letter to the powerful chief Coroticus was an anguished cry for the equal rights of every person to a life of dignity, worth, and respect. Patrick saw no future for reconciliation without such justice.

My friends, human rights abuses start with seeing other people as things, rather than as human beings like ourselves. Once we cross that line, we can treat them as obstacles to get rid of, or as merchandise to sell for profit, or as bargaining chips to barter, or as tools to use for our benefit.

Born and raised in Sierra Leone - on the continent of Africa - I speak as one whose people were bought, sold, and used for profit; whose continent was partitioned without any reference to or consultation with its inhabitants and owners; and whose colour is

seen as sufficient excuse to ignore their equal humanity with others. Consequently, I have spent the last 26 years on this island negotiating my acceptance as of equal value with Irish people.

In standing against slavery and the violence to human dignity it represents, Patrick leaves us with a legacy of including others in our humanity, regardless of who they are. That is what Paul's text on reconciliation in 2Corinthians is about. Reconciliation refuses to see people through any other lens other than how God sees them – as made in His image. That is why Paul says that 'From now on, we regard no one from a worldly perspective'. (2Cor.5:16) And this from a man who confessed that, before he was a Christian, he was extremely zealous for the traditions of his fathers and won't tolerate others who were different. (Galatians 1:14)

My friends, how we see others is important. There is a short story in Mark's Gospel of Jesus healing a blind man by rubbing saliva on his eyes. The first time Jesus does this, he asks the man to tell him the result. 'I see people, but they look like trees walking', the man says to Jesus. (Mark 8:24) Jesus repeats his action on the man's eyes. And then the man sees clearly – that is, he sees people as people.

How we see people is the springboard of justice or injustice. If we see them as human beings like ourselves, we will treat them like we want to be treated. If we see them like trees walking, we will treat them as such.

I bring you good news! By the grace of Jesus, we can see and treat different others as people like ourselves. Hope for a better future must be rooted in that possibility.

III. Finally, I bring you good news!

Our Gospel reading is from what has been traditionally known as Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount'. That sermon has inspired justice and peace movements in recent history including decolonisation, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Martin Luther King's struggle for racial justice. The core values of that sermon are mercy, compassion, solidarity, justice, and peace. This was what Jesus taught and practised as a way towards just and peaceful society. It was a vision for the real world he experienced under Roman Imperialism with its systems of conquest, domination, and exploitation. So, Jesus' alternative vision was for this world you and I live in here and now, not another world. It is that vision that led to his execution by an unjust and oppressive political and military system.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, building an equal and just future is costly. It is a moral imperative needing moral courage to fulfil. Failing that, hope for a just and peaceful co-existence of different peoples and traditions on this island, as anywhere else, will remain just that – hope. A moral imperative, courage, and hope are intertwined. Perhaps a most concrete way to embrace them is to seek to make space in our lives for even those we believe have wronged us.

Let me finish with a story Greg Myre tells about Nelson Mandela of South Africa. He says that six times Mandela was offered conditional release from prison by the then apartheid government. Six times he refused. And one of the six times, he said this to his detainers, 'I cherish my own freedom dearly, but I care even more for your freedom'¹

¹ Nelson Mandela and the Virtue of Compromise, December 8, 2013

Embracing different others is not about promoting oneself. It is about creating space for each other to flourish. It is not about assimilating them into ourselves. It is about recognizing that there is something of us in the ones we embrace. It is not about ignoring justice. It is about creating space within ourselves for the perceived wrongdoer in hope of reconciliation. That is what GRACE is. It is choosing relationship over being right. That is what Christianity is and should be about. That is what Christian practice is.

So, I offer you Jesus Christ. With His Spirit working in and through us, just living, undeserved generosity of embrace, forgiveness, and acceptance are possible.

I bring you good news, in the name of Christ. Amen.

Ends.