

Pre Good FRIDAY

REFERENDUM

-1/5-

*Sixth Sunday of Easter - Easter 5 (Rogation Sunday) - 1998 - year C - Morning Service*

During this past week I was in Dublin attending the General Synod of the Church of Ireland. This body, with delegates drawn from every diocese of our Church, is ultimately responsible for the governance of the Church of Ireland. This year there were a number of issues being discussed. These included the reorganisation of Diocesan boundaries, mainly in the Republic; developments in our liturgy which will result in the publication of a single prayer book for the Church including both the traditional and revised services, the layout of a new hymn book as well as ongoing concerns such as the Church's involvement in education, in mission (both home and overseas) and more mundane issues such as the clergy pension fund - the retirement age for clergy is at long last being reduced to 65.

The synod was of course being held against the background of the referenda being held in both parts of this island arising from the Agreement reached between the parties on Good Friday. This topic was raised at a number of points at the synod. The Primate devoted a good deal of his Presidential Address to the issue and it was brought up in a number of the debates and was the topic of a special resolution passed by the Synod. The whole thrust of the resolution and the Primate's remarks was not to give specific direction as to how members of the Church of Ireland should vote. Rather the message was one of a call to carefully read the Agreement and prayerfully reflect on the issues raised and then to cast our votes.

We all have to make up our own minds before God as we seek to decide what is best for the future of our Province. I would just want to make the following points on aspects of the debate that I have found disturbing.

The suggestion has been made that a Christian can only vote No. As the Archbishop of Armagh declared in his address to the General Synod last Tuesday, in which as I say he studiously avoided giving any specific direction as to how we should vote, such an argument is totally false. No one side in the debate has a monopoly on spiritual validity. A member of the Church is free to vote Yes or vote No with equal integrity. No one side has the right to claim a monopoly.

I have also been disturbed in recent weeks as I have read letters to the local papers to see some quite appalling abuses of scripture. It would seem to me that people have gone to the Scriptures with their mind made up and sifted through the Bible to find texts, taken out of context, that suit their opinions. You can find texts that suit both sides. We need to listen to the total voice of scripture rather than just the bits that suit us. To suggest that Jesus would vote No, or that Jesus would vote Yes for that matter, represents a quite appalling spiritual impertinence.

I have also been greatly disturbed at how the victims of the last thirty years have been used. The victims have responded to the Agreement in a variety of ways. Some have been greatly troubled, some have spoken of hope. What worries me is that people who have not been directly affected have come, again with their minds made up, and chosen whichever victim suits their argument, be it for a Yes vote or a No vote. This amounts to using them as ammunition in the debate rather than a genuine listening to their pain. This was brought out most eloquently in a letter to the Belfast Telegraph last Thursday night. The writer was the brother of an RUC officer murdered by the IRA. He wrote of politicians who turned up as his brother's funeral, who spoke as if they knew his brother and his family when they did

not and they have not been near the family since. He has reservations about the agreement but feels pain at how his pain has been exploited, speaking of politicians dancing on the graves of victims.

As we come to our decision we need to listen to the total voice of scripture, we need to listen to all the victims. We abuse both scripture and victims if we simply selectively use them as ammunition for our side of the argument, whether it be for or against.

So how are we, as members of the Christian Church, to approach the decision we will have to make next Friday? Since the question is on the Agreement we do have to read it and read it carefully. It is a complex document; there are things in it we may welcome, others with which we will disagree. Inevitably our decision will involve striking a balance; deciding whether what we welcome outweighs what we disagree with. Equally inevitably there will be people here who will vote differently to the way we do as individuals. One of the characteristics of a Christian in the context of argument and disagreement is the way in which discussion is conducted. There is no place for aggressive manipulation, personal insult or demeaning people. For example during the week, one prominent politician in the course of a rally described the Secretary of State as an Arab with a turban. Now people may well have reservations about how the Secretary of State has fulfilled her office. They may fundamentally disagree with her approach but all should recognise that she has conducted her battle against her brain tumour, with consequent loss of hair, with a quite remarkable courage and dignity. Anyone with a trace of Christian charity should want no part in such vindictiveness.

We have to decide Is the Agreement fair? Institutions of Government in any society must protect the rights of all and address the aspirations of all. We have to decide Do the changes in the Constitution of the Republic, the willingness of the representatives of nationalist opinion to work within a Northern Ireland Assembly, over and against the institutional arrangements for cross border cooperation: do these represent a fair balance. I would have to say that the Christian must be one who looks not just to his own interest but the interests of all.

There are a number of difficult issues. Probably one that is uppermost in most people's minds is that of the early release of prisoners, particular in the light of their crimes and the suffering that they have caused. We do need to listen to the voice of the victims, all of the victims - as we seek to move forward, they must not be forgotten. This is an issue that other societies across the world have had to face as they have moved out of conflict situations. In an imperfect world such as ours we are faced with situations of choosing what we may see as the lesser of two evils.

Deep and earnest prayer must form the background to our thoughts over the next few days as we prepare to cast our vote. The result of the vote next Friday will affect the Province for many years. This morning in St Colman's we are welcoming a child into the family of the Church in Baptism. The parents have hopes and plans for the future. That future will in a large part be affected by that vote. In a very real sense we are voting not just for ourselves but for the generation to come.

There is a fundamental Biblical imperative. "Blessed are the peacemakers." We have to seek peace, we have to pray for peace, e

have to work for peace. We have to ask Will this Agreement, and the institutions it proposes, help to heal the divisions in our society and lead to peace and justice for all? Whichever way we cast our vote, we should see it as proposing the cause of peace, the true and lasting peace we have been seeking in our prayers.

To conclude:

Read the Agreement.

Pray about it.

Make your decision on the basis of the issues, on the basis of truth not deceit.

On Friday cast your vote.

Continue to pray for our Province and those called to leadership. Whatever the result of the vote, for the sake of the rising generation this Province cannot, must not, remain in gridlock. We have to find ways of working together.

Finally, lest there be any misunderstanding, members of the Church can vote Yes or vote No with equal integrity. May God be with you all, as before God, you make up your mind.