

I recall during the course of my training for the ministry, the then Sub-Warden of the Divinity Hostel, the late Canon Jim Hartin was lecturing us in Church History. He had been talking about the growth of the Anglican Communion and the distinctive witness Anglicanism had to offer to the wider Church. Bringing us closer to home, (this was in the late 1970's) he went on to speak of the distinctive witness the Church of Ireland had to offer in a divided society such as Northern Ireland. Standing as we were between the Reformed tradition, as represented by the Presbyterian Church, and the Roman Catholic tradition we had a vocation to hold the middle ground, to be a sign of reconciliation. The middle of the road he remarked is far from being the easy option many of our critics would maintain it to be – as you tend to be hit by traffic coming in both directions.

I often reflected on that during the time I served in Ahoghill. During the 1990's the political middle ground became harder and harder to hold as people moved to the extremes, as moderate nationalism as represented by the SDLP lost ground to Sinn Fein and moderate unionism as represented by the pro-agreement wing of the Official Unionists was displaced by the DUP. In Ahoghill Parish we came to realise that we had a vocation to affirm moderates in the wider community. St Colmanell's became the venue for ecumenical events (we tended to call them Community Carol Services, Community Service for children with Special Needs) and our Parish Fete, held just before the 12th, was an occasion for the whole community to come together.

I thought on Canon Hartin's observation again over the last couple of weeks when we were in South Africa. On Ascension Day and the two Sunday's we were in Cape Town we worshiped in St George's Cathedral. The Cathedral has long seen itself as a sign called to witness to the society in which it stands. They have as their mission statement:

We, the Body of Christ, wounded - pained by the journey of reconciliation that we need to walk - are an inclusive household of faith.

- We accept, embrace and uphold each other as a Cathedral community.
- We nurture our youth and children, exploring and expanding their potential, shaping their faith and empowering their lives. We respect and cherish the contribution of our elders.
- We worship God through the creativity of music, art and liturgy.
- We respond to God's grace by the generosity of our giving.

- We apply our faith in the places where we live and work.

We recognise a special commitment to encounter Christ in suffering. In this, we provide inspiration and challenge, healing and hope to our diocese, city and nation.

As the people's cathedral we are a market-place for truth and live our faith in continual transformation.

In earlier years it was a focus of the struggle against apartheid. A former Dean had offered sanctuary to protestors attacked by the police. The police forced their way into the Cathedral and beat the protestors in the main body of the Cathedral – the Dean publicly reconsecrated the Cathedral as a protest against what had happened. On another occasion at a service at which Archbishop Desmond Tutu was preaching, plain clothed police came in and stood menacingly along the side walls. Tutu stopped his sermon and said to the police, ‘Come in, listen to us – you will never win, the ultimate victory belongs to us.’ The Cathedral stood as a sign between the forces of Apartheid and the forces of violent confrontation – an example of Anglicanism’s distinctive witness to the wider Church and the society within which it is set. In recent years the Cathedral has been a place of ministry and hope for those suffering from HIV and AIDS when South African society from President Mbeki down was in a state of denial on this whole issue.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost. Our lesson from Acts, in speaking of that first Pentecost, tells of the assembled crowd each hearing the Gospel in their own language. This morning, as is the case on every Sunday morning, the service in St George’s Cathedral will be mainly in English but will incorporate readings, verses of hymns and prayers in English and also in Xhosa and Afrikaans. The languages that marked divisions in South African society used in shared worship by a cathedral community that is drawn from all racial groupings in South Africa as each hear and celebrate the Gospel in their own language.

This morning our 11 o’clock service incorporates the sacrament of Baptism as we welcome a child into the fellowship of Christ’s Church. Baptism has at its heart the two elements of God’s transforming work in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth and with that my response to that as I seek to live as a disciple of Christ, as in

my life I seek to live as one who has renounced the deceit and corruption of evil, as one who has submitted to Christ as Lord. Discipleship is about who we are long before the words we speak. Pentecost is about empowerment, the strength and inspiration that God supplies to his Church to enable us to be truly his body in the world of today.

Over the last couple of weeks, as I reflected over that observation of Canon Hartin about the distinctive vocation of the Anglican Communion and the witness and worship in St George's Cathedral, I thought of the power of lives inspired and transformed by the Gospel to impact upon, to challenge the wider community in which the Church is set.

Towards the end of this service we will pray for Fionn, that he will grow into the commitments that are made on his behalf today:

Father, we thank you that ... *have* now been born again of water and the Holy Spirit, and *have* become your own *children* by adoption, and *members* of your Church.  
Grant that *they* may grow in the faith in which *they* have been baptized;  
Grant that *they themselves* may confess it when *they come* to be confirmed;  
Grant that *they* may bear witness to it by a life of service to others;  
And that all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in *them*;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

As I often remark, as with so many of the prayers and commitments of the Baptismal Service, these words are not just about this child, they are about our own continuing commitment.

In fellowship with Fionn, let us pray for ourselves:

Grant that we may grow in the faith in which we have been baptized;  
Grant that we ourselves may confess it when we come to be confirmed;  
Grant that we may bear witness to it by a life of service to others;  
And that all things belonging to the Spirit may live and grow in us;  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

That we as individuals and as a community may be living signs of a living Lord in the world we encounter this week.