



**Churches
in Ireland**
Connecting
in Christ

**Irish Council of Churches
Irish Inter-Church
Meeting**

Reverend Dr Harold Good
**Address and Service celebrating ICC Centenary and 50th
Anniversary of the Ballymascanlon Talks**

Sunday 22nd January 2023
St. Anne's Cathedral, Belfast

In the late 50's our daily headlines were dominated by stories of political unrest - menacing rhetoric and the threat of escalating violence. And tragically . . . the callous murder of a second young police officer. The family minister was deeply distressed at the loss of this young life – but he also feared this might well be the beginning of a very dark period in our historyas indeed it proved to be.

So when elected to be one of our Church leaders he felt compelled to share his concerns with the leaders of other churches - including the then Cardinal of the Catholic Church.

At that time . . . other than an occasional courteous handshake at civic functions they had never met as an ALL inclusive group!

So to each he wrote a personal plea, suggesting that they might come together and be seen together in the sharing of a very public statement of mutual concern. From each he received a courteous reply . . . to the effect . . .

“Yes . . . it was a nice idea, BUT the time was not right !

I know that story because that Church leader happened to be my father! How he would rejoice in how far we have come since then and in the shared vision we celebrate today.

HOW OFTEN WE HAVE SOUGHT REFUGE BEHIND . . . the over-worked excuse of “the time is not right”?

The perceptive author of the Book of Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a time for everything.

“A time to healA time to tear down . . . and a time to build”

For us the time to “tear down” has long gone.

Now is the time for healing

Now is the time for buildingto build on our shared vision of reconciliation.

FOR ALL OF US WHO ARE HERE THIS AFTERNOON . . . whether from church or state or civic society we do well to ask of ourselves as well as one another . . .

“What can each of us bring to this reconciling vision of our sadly fractured community?”

FOR US FROM WITHIN THE CHURCHES our scriptures make clear that Reconciliation is not an optional extra. As we have already been reminded this afternoon – in St Paul's call to the Church in Corinth

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“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to himself through Jesus Christ, and has entrusted to us the ministry of reconciliation.”

So - to be specific “What do we - from within this community of faith? What do we have to bring to this vision of reconciliation ?”

If time permitted we could speak of ‘GRACE’ and ‘FORGIVENESS’

There is a sermon in each ... BUT this afternoon I will offer TWO words?

‘HUMILITY’ and ‘HOPE’

It is in HUMILITY that we as churches recognize . . . that we do not have a monopoly on the things which make for peace. Thankfully God does not confine Himself to Church conferences or conclaves! ALL of us – from whatever sector we have come – have something distinctive to bring.

And it is in HUMILITY that we confess we have not always been obedient to the Gospel entrusted to us. Too often we have been silent when we ought to have spoken AND too often we stood back when others fueled the flames of sectarianism and strife.

In the words of prayers with which most of us will be familiar

“we confess through our thoughts as well as in our words,
in what we have done and in what we have failed to say and do.”

Let us not under-estimate the impact of the words of the late Queen Elizabeth, (Dublin) in genuine humility she spoke of things . . . which could have been done differently, . . . or not at all.

Just imagine if following this service – if in genuine humility each of us were to acknowledge that which WE could have done differently – or NOT at all!

Gosh – there’s a headline! BUT – come on - why wait for the headline !

BUT HUMILITY is not to be confused with resignation or despair.

On the contrary – it is in genuine acknowledgement that we are liberated to look forward with restored confidence in ourselves and in each other!

HENCE - the second word we have to bring to our conversation.

Which is “HOPE”.

Sadly, for far too long we have allowed ourselves to be immersed in a culture of despair. “things will never be any different” . . . is an all too familiar mantra. A glum message that is not lost on our young people who increasingly are looking elsewhere when considering their options for the future.

WE do well to remember the call of the Old Testament prophet Zachariah to his people in another troubled time and place when he challenged them to be “prisoners of HOPE”, rather than despair !

Very soon – we will be invited to mark the 25th Anniversary of the signing of the GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT. Let us all hope and pray and do all we can to ensure that broken bridges will be repaired by that date.

While some had their difficulties and doubts which we respect, for so many of us across this island it was a day of HOPE! A day when ‘hope and history’ finally did rhyme !

And on the Easter Day which followed we sang our joyful hymns even more joyfully For at the centre of our shared faith is our unshakable belief in Resurrection !

The victory of HOPE over DESPAIR.

And, it is to us that God has entrusted this Gospel of Hope !!

BUT THIS HOPE OF WHICH WE SPEAK is not to be confused with a benign optimism which chooses to ignore the painful realities of the world in which we live our daily lives. It was Saint Augustine who said that

“HOPE had two beautiful daughters.

One was called Anger and the other was called Courage !

HOPE looks at the world as it is and responds with a determination to change it.

This shared HOPE of which we speak is rooted in the unshakeable conviction that if we say and do and be the people that we are called to be, God will not be found wanting.

Later this year we will commemorate another anniversary. 60 years since Martin Luther King shared his vision

of a reconciled world in his historic and impassioned speech at the Pool of Reflection in Washington. “I have a dream” – we can still hear him ! A speech which had a profound impact on history of America as well as inspiring the world

But I have come across a much less known but no less powerful address. It is to be found in a sermon which he delivered the following Christmas in which he speaks of terrible things which have happened since that day in Washington. He speaks of burnings and of bombings; of riots and mayhem. and of the murders of innocent children. But he ends his sermon with a resounding affirmation of faith,

“I STILL have a dream!”

HUMILITY and HOPE !

Let these be the gifts we bring to the table - around which we all must meet as we celebrate how far we have come . . . and share our 'reconciling vision of Hope"