

Sermon by Archbishop John McDowell at the 11am Service of Choral Matins on June 2 2024 celebrating the 120th anniversary of the Consecration of Belfast Cathedral

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. In Anim an Áthair, agus a Mhic, agus a Spiorad Naomh. Amen.

One of the good things about following a lectionary is that the preacher doesn't get to choose a favourite passage or a passage that he or she knows will either flatter or annoy the congregation. Instead he or she has to make what they can of what the lectionary offers for that particular Sunday. In this case the call of the boy Samuel, one of the great prophets of Israel, and the Parable of the Rich Fool. The Biblical writers intended that those who read or heard the Scriptures would find points and people to identify with. So, take your pick- the call of boy Samuel or the Rich Fool?

What are we to make of these two readings in the context of a Service of Thanksgiving for the 120th Anniversary of the completion of this nave? As you will know the word nave is an anglicisation of the Latin word *navum*, meaning a ship, and it harks back to the time when the Church was thought of as the ark or the ship of salvation. I think that's a good start. Here we are, a large group of people drawn from political and civic life, representative of many thousands of people who can't be here today ... and we all find ourselves in the same boat.

Which is precisely where the people of Belfast, the people of Northern Ireland, the people of this island actually are. In the same boat. Although we may look at it from different angles, we are nevertheless facing a common reality. And that reality has so many challenges and threats that it is impossible for any one person or one tradition to carry it alone. In this great cathedral today, what belongs together has been brought; brought together to give thanks, and to ask God, together, for his blessing on this cathedral, on this city and on this world. Together.

Any cathedral, especially a cathedral downtown in a capital city has at least two functions and they are very well summed up by the Dean's motto of a place "At the heart of the City with the City at its heart".

First and foremost a cathedral is a place for those who love Jesus and who have felt the beauty of his eternal love for them, to come together to worship him and to witness to his love. I met a man a few weeks ago who said this: "What kind of love would not feel the need to speak of the Beloved, to worship Him, to point him out and to make him known. Or who from personal experience can say that it is the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to have heard his word as not to have heard it, not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him and to find our peace in him as not to."

That is the hourly business of this cathedral and we should never forget it. A place for the friends of Jesus to gather around his table and his word with a sense of expectancy as we to say, like the boy Samuel, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening". Love's first duty is to listen.

By the way the man I met who said those simple and memorable words was Pope Francis. Big name drop right there.

But a cathedral such as this is also a great civic space, a place where everyone in this city and beyond can come and feel that it is in some way common ground. For many years, before it was customary to have seats in the nave of cathedrals, they were often used as market places and as venues where courts of law sat. In the records (not of this cathedral I'm relieved to say, but of the old St Paul's Cathedral in London) there is the account of the trial of a man who was charged with (as it says rather politely) "making water" behind one of the pillars. In his defence he pleaded that he had lived beside St Paul's for fifty years and had never known that it was a cathedral. That could never be said about this place.

Civic society has a very special place and a very particular role to play in Belfast and in Northern Ireland and it is by no means pejorative to say that there are certain things that civic society can do which politics with a capital P might find it very difficult to do. It is only a little bit of an exaggeration to say that politicians end wars but that civic society makes the peace.

In fact civic society activity sustained through time by people who are committed to remain in relationship, sitting alongside one another regardless of the fluctuations of the electoral cycle, may be the only way to ensure that politics addresses the most consequential issues faced by people, and that the processes of politics have the expertise and the authority to bring about solutions.

Such dialogue also results in friendship as a political and civic virtue, which in turn creates a body of travelling companions who have grown to trust one another despite their deep differences, as they contemplate the next steps in the journey. You cannot legislate for trust, loyalty, friendship and solidarity. Every democracy will only be as good as the civic forces that sustain it.

Of course we need to be realistic. Politics and civic life are complex and tough, and expectations can be easily exaggerated. The people who are gathered here today work at the coalface of political, voluntary, commercial and academic life and perhaps we shouldn't expect to find gold in a coal mine. Yet sometimes we will and at those times it is spaces like this that come into their own as a focus for celebration and thanksgiving.

As you probably know there is only one person buried in the nave of this cathedral. Sir Edward Carson, Lord Carson of Duncairn, the Dublin lawyer whose name is for ever associated with Ulster and with the Ulster Covenant. It has been said that a Covenant is something which Protestants write in order to remind God whose side he is on. Yet probably the most remarkable bishop of this cathedral, John Frederick McNeice, father of the poet Louis McNeice, refused to sign the Covenant when he was rector of Carrickfergus and persuaded all the other clergy of Carrickfergus not sign either. Now this is Carrickfergus we're talking about, boys!

McNeice was a strong all-Ireland Unionist and Orangeman and he remained on good terms with Carson despite their differences. Yet as his son Louis said about his father the bishop, there was about him something which was "solitary and wild" as there is with all prophets. Sometimes the Church is accused of being too comfortable and self satisfied. Of not being prophetic enough. When people say that they usually mean that they want the Church to agree with them preferably in a very loud voice.

Prophets like Samuel did not predict the future. Their task was to call Israel back to its true vocation, particularly in the area of what we now call social justice. As one of them memorably said:

‘Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.
But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!’

When the builders of this place had to decide which architectural style they would use they chose Romanesque, an early style of Gothic which had rounded rather than ogive or pointed arches. It was in some ways a typically Irish thing to do; to look to the future by referring to the distant past. But sooner or later the past catches up with us. It caught up with us in the financial crisis of 2008 when our belief – yours and mine – that we could have everything and that there would always be more proved to be utterly ruinous. It is catching up with us again in the form of a climate crisis that we still don’t take half seriously enough.

We are maiming our planet and our country. In the 120 years we mark today 500 vertebrates have gone extinct in our world, yet we seem incapable of applying the brakes never mind going into reverse gear. As it says on the tower of another famous ecclesiastical building in the East of this city “Time is short”. It was only in our grandparents’ time that someone was valued for what they produced. In a fatal turn we took during the 1980s we are now valued by what we consume. We have bigger barns and smaller consciences.

The past has caught up with us also in our seeming inability to deal with the not so distant legacy of the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the Dean and his working group here in St Anne’s are to be encouraged for their initiative in picking up at least one of the threads of that legacy task in the vision for a memorialisation centre here in the heart of Belfast.

We have read the words but still do not hear them as addressed to us:

He spoke a parable to them, saying, “The ground of a certain rich man brought forth abundantly...” But God said to him, 'You foolish one, tonight your soul is required of you. The things which you have prepared—whose will they be?' So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

All of us gathered here today are in one way or another responsible not only for our own soul but also for the soul of this City and this island. We will all of us stand one day before those searching eyes to give an account of how we have tended this little piece of God’s creation and of our own invention. Will we have spent our time and our talents and our energy in building bigger barns for ourselves like the rich fool? Or will we have used them to build up the things that God values? Things like the love of our neighbour and care for those who the world in its cynical wisdom cares little for – the sick, the poor, and the dying.

When our children and our grandchildren are clearing out the roof space when we are gone and they stumble across the Order of Service for this event will they say, ‘there were prophets present that day in Belfast Cathedral, and we thank God for them, and for the inheritance which they have left to us. The inheritance which God loves most highly – the gift of peace from the hand of His Son, the Prince of Peace.’

