

## **General Synod Service 2011**

*Address by the Rt Revd Ken Clarke, Bishop of Kilmore, Elphin and Ardagh*

*Intro: Bishop of Cork's text at the General Synod Service in 2002. Acts 19:32*

"The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there."

It's a great text for many committees and meetings. Sadly it can also apply to worship, in the sense that we don't know why we are here. We have forgotten that when we gather in worship we come to listen. When one of our daughters was little she stayed with her grandparents. She observed her granny doing something she had never seen her parents do. She was intrigued. Granny could take her teeth out and put them in again! Having observed this a few times, in her childhood innocence she asked, "Granny can you take your ears off as well?" Sometimes we can do that in the context of worship. We leave our ears at home, or in the office or in the car.

This evening as we listen to these words from Haggai in our Old Testament Reading we hear a message which is decidedly uncomfortable and profoundly disturbing. A Haggai in a church is not the most popular vote catching member. He may not be elected on to a Vestry, let alone General Synod. You will not hear his message in the status quo brigade. Probing questions, truth telling and reality checks are not the flavour of the month with a people who have neglected their God given priorities. Yes, that is what this message of Haggai is all about... PRIORITIES!

### **RIGHT PRIORITIES... Haggai**

Thank God we have a Priorities Fund in the Church but honestly, what are our priorities as a Church in Ireland in 2011? In recent years the Bishops summarized our priorities in the three words Growth, Unity, and Service, but are these real priorities in every parish? In the time of Haggai the priorities for God's people were making money, living in fine houses, eating the best food. There is nothing wrong with any of these things but when the House of the Lord lies in ruins then they needed to hear the Word of the Lord and reexamine their priorities. God's people in the time of Haggai were busy, active and industrious, but they were missing the mark.

It's not that in itself there is anything wrong in building and furnishing your own home whether the furniture is from Ikea, Fultons, Brown & Thomas or Harrods ... the real issue is that God's priority had become secondary in the lives of His people. What was first in His mind was not first in theirs. Their houses were beautiful; God's house was in ruins. Their homes had the very best. God's house was forgotten neglected and crumbling.

What about us? We cannot be arrogant and think ... how dreadful, that could only happen in Old Testament times. It can happen all too easily today ... it can even happen in a Church of Ireland General Synod or parish. God's priorities are not ours.

### ***How do we know if God's temple is in ruins?***

Before answering that let's be clear that God's temple is no longer a building made with hands. It is not made of brick sandstone or granite. St. Paul says to the church, a body of people, "you are the temple of the living God." (2 Cor. 6:16). So, with that understanding ...

God's temple is in ruins when people can say of the Church, "we cannot trust even the church to tell the truth any more" as one of our politicians said a few years ago.

His temple is in ruins when Christian people fight one another for we are called to love one another.

His temple is in ruins when our own selfish needs become more important than those of the church and the community and we resist any inconveniencing of ourselves for the sake of the Gospel.

His temple is in ruins when people do not see in the Church, Christ the friend of sinners ... when we hear phrases like, "oh they may be here but they are not ours or one of us."

His temple is in ruins when we are selfishly selective about whom we really welcome in our parishes. Philip Yancey tells a powerful story at the beginning of his book, "What's so amazing about grace?" A friend who works with the downtrodden in Chicago tells of a prostitute coming to him in a wretched state. She was sick, homeless and unable to buy food for her 2 year old child.

He said, "I could hardly listen to her sordid story ... At last I asked her if she had ever thought of going to a church for help. I will never forget the look of pure naive shock that crossed her face. "Church" she said, "Why would I ever go there? I was already feeling terrible about myself. They'd just make me feel worse."

Does that only happen in Chicago? Do our communities of faith follow and model Christ the friend of sinners? In His day the hurting, the lonely and the marginalized, flocked to Him. Have we lost the heart of Christ? Are we a church which is a friend of sinners or does His temple lie in compassionless ruins?

When the poison of sectarianism and a stark or sophisticated racism are marks of our church life His temple is in ruins.

His church is in ruins when we care more about ourselves than the poor, the disadvantaged and the hurting in our world. Justice mercy and humility are marks of His temple.

His church is in ruins when the salt has lost its savour and when those who believe in a God of love and truth are known neither for love nor truth. .

Have we still got our ears on? As a church are we listening?

Honestly, what are the real priorities of this Synod, our parishes, our lives? Are we planting much and harvesting little? Eating but never having enough? Earning wages but feeling as if they go into a bag with holes? Busy with our own affairs whilst the house of the Lord is crumbling? If we are to move forward then we are compelled to ask...

***What are God's priorities? How can they be restored?*** We find the answers in our Epistle and Gospel.

## CLEAR VISION... Peter

Right priorities flow from a clear vision and at the heart of Peter's vision of the Church are these telling words..."Come to Him." The vision is all about Him. It is all about Christ. Coming to Him empowers us to be vision fulfillers.

What is God's vision according to Peter? God's vision is that we are living stones... not immobile cement blocks.

We are called to be loving invaders of struggling communities not detached curators of a museum.

We are to be a people of declaration and demonstration ... declaring the praises of Him who called us into His marvellous light ... **and totally committed to living it out.**

We are to live such good lives that people will see our good deeds says Peter.

According to St. Paul we are soldiers on service... not entertainers in Dad's army.

We are athletes in training mode .....not couch potatoes in lazy mode.

We are to be like hard working farmers ... not fast asleep nor distracted during harvest.

Isn't that where we have fallen, in parts of the Church in Ireland? Christ wants His church back.

As we come to Christ we do not see in Him selfish priorities, a lack of integrity, broken trust or abuse of position. Nor should these things be seen in the lives of Christ followers. When they are present then once again the house of the Lord is in ruins.

Members of Synod, the gap has BEEN TOO WIDE between the profession of our creeds and our daily deeds, between our words and our actions. It has been said that the last Reformation was a reformation of Creeds... now we need a reformation of deeds. Ireland desperately needs from God's people gestures of grace, missions of mercy and acts of love... Christ-shaped deeds and actions.

Too often we are known for disunity rather than unity. Jesus calls us to love one another and instead we fight one another. Too many Christians seem to think that Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name there will be a fight!"

Can we fix it? Yes, we can! How?

- By establishing right priorities... His priorities
- By repenting of our obsessions with self, and our seeking to preserve what needs to die.

His House is what matters. His Kingdom comes first. His will is priority. "Not my will but yours be done" is a dangerous prayer but it is the Lord's prayer. It may lead to a cross just as it did for Him.

Can the House of the Lord be restored? Yes it can! It will require deep soul searching, ruthless honesty, and courageous action. It will mean coming afresh to Christ. Can He fix it? Yes He can! Did He not do something in the temple in His day? Yes he did! Radical action was the outworking of righteous anger.

## ***RIGHTEOUS ANGER and RADICAL ACTION ... Jesus***

Sometimes we say it is wrong for a Christian to be angry and sometimes it is wrong. But there is such a thing as righteous anger. When we see human beings devalued and demeaned we should be angry. When we see deprived communities, financial hardship, greedy profiteers, heartless godfathers, frightened children, neglected elderly people, we should be angry. When we hear young British and Irish men shouting disgraceful hurtful racist terms at people, just because of the colour of their skin ... we should be angry. Just this week a friend of mine who leads a church with over 30 nationalities in it and not over 50 miles from here, came out of the Monday night prayer gathering. As he did he heard shouting. It was 11 pm. Two ladies were standing in the car park and two young men out on the street were screaming abuse at them. It wasn't just any abuse. It was a particularly offensive form of racial abuse, full of liberal use of the "N" word and threats of violence? Another member who was a bus driver in one of our major cities said that every single day of his working life he suffered racial abuse. When, sectarian, tribal, racist, homophobic and loveless words attitudes and actions are marks of our society on this island we should be angry... because Christ is

When we see the House of the Lord in ruins and activities going on in the lives of God's people which are not holy righteous Christ-glorifying and in accordance with His will we should be angry. There should be tears in our eyes and a righteous anger in our hearts. We are called to be a HOLY nation, God's own people. When Christ saw what was happening in His Father's house He acted decisively. There was a clear out! There is nothing wrong per se in buying and selling but that's not what the temple was for. These activities should not have been happening there. Once again they had got their priorities all wrong. I wonder what needs cleared out in our parishes and in our own personal lives.

Last year one of the best clergy Training Days we have had in the diocese was led by a clergyperson from the Episcopal Church of the USA. He told us something of his life story. When he was a Headmaster in his late 20's he became a Christian. He said that up until that point in his life the accurate description of his life was "It's all about me!" After his encounter with Christ that changed to "It's all about Him and me!" Many years later on the day of his ordination that changed. In 1993 he was kneeling during his Ordination Service and he could not take his eyes off a stunning stained glass window depicting the ascended Christ. In particular the prints of the nails in Christ's hands impacted him and he said that God did something very deep within him. "It's all about Him and me" became "It's all about Him and them." Ever since that is how he has been living. "It's all about Him and them." Members of General Synod that is God's vision for the Church.

When the Church is "all about us," then we are back to the time of Haggai. God's house lies in ruins.

When it's all about "Him and us" ...well that's better, because as we focus on Him we are more likely to catch His vision.

When it's all about "Him and them" then we have caught God's vision. We exist not for the people who are in our parish churches at Sunday worship but for those who aren't! We are to proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Recently one person said of her local Church of Ireland Parish, "I don't go to church. I am not a Christian. I don't believe the Christian faith but let me tell you. I don't want this community without that Church because those people make a difference in this community." There is a church which is living out

God's vision. The people in the community know they are loved. I wonder how many people are saying such things about our parish?

So what is God's purpose for His people in Ireland today? He is looking for people who are radical in love, reckless in sacrifice, courageous in witness, resilient in service, generous in giving, Christ-like in living... this is the church as it is meant to be.

- A people with right priorities, God's priorities
- A people with clear vision, His vision
- A people who are angry about what makes Him angry
- A people totally committed to radical Christ-like action.

As we gather this year in Synod, in the midst of Reports and speeches, Motions and Bills let us remember who we are and why we are here.