

Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhacha/Armagh Diocesan Historical Society

Sermon of the Most Reverend George L. Carey, Archbishop of Canterbury, at Festal Evensong in St. Patrick's Church of Ireland Cathedral Marking the 1550th Anniversary of the Founding of Patrick's Great Stone Church, 15 November 1994

Source: *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1994), pp. 249-251

Published by: [Cumann Seanchais Ard Mhacha/Armagh Diocesan Historical Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29742648>

Accessed: 16/06/2014 00:54

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gifts, for granting us this great gift. I believe that priests and people will wish to arrange special occasions for prayers of devotion where people can come to thank and praise God and to implore his help for what still remains to be done.

An immense task awaits us. I hope that all who respond to this announcement will appreciate its great significance and the new opportunity which it opens up. There is much forgiving to be done, much healing, much listening to one another, much readiness to reach out in reconciliation and to walk in new paths. Let us work hard at learning to overcome suspicion and to put trust where there has been habitual mistrust.

May God empower us all in the crucial days and weeks ahead to work with all our energies, each in her or his own place, for a future where neither tradition feels threatened or insecure and where each can work with the other for the good of both, under the sovereignty of our common Lord, Jesus Christ.

SERMON OF THE MOST REVEREND GEORGE L. CAREY, ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY, AT
FESTAL EVENSONG IN ST PATRICK'S CHURCH OF IRELAND CATHEDRAL MARKING THE
1550TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE FOUNDING OF PATRICK'S GREAT STONE CHURCH,
15 NOVEMBER 1994

Today we gather here in this ancient and holy place to celebrate Patrick, and to give thanks for the 1550 years of Christian witness with which he is associated in Armagh. Such a celebration is the cause of humility for an Archbishop of Canterbury. For while we are proud of Augustine and of our own pedigree, even so, when in three years' time we celebrate our own long history, it will be a mere fourteen hundred years. We bow to a longer heritage still.

Patrick is one of the most attractive and human of all Christian missionaries. His humility was demonstrated by his constant reference to his own inadequacies and failures. At times he was not averse to expressing his frustration with some directness. Sir Ifor Williams points out that Patrick was reputed to have sworn in Welsh! All this is counterbalanced by his own sense of God working within him — his weakness and fallibility increased his awareness of his dependence upon God's love to keep him going.

Patrick's Welsh roots mean that to some extent he belongs to both our islands — Ireland and Britain. As an Englishman, however, I had better be careful not to claim too much — although being a Carey I may have more an Irish pedigree than some. Whatever else we claim, there is no doubt that Patrick belongs to the whole of Ireland. In that sense this is an All-Ireland occasion. It is marvellous to see that echoed in the presence of President Mary Robinson and of the Secretary of State, Sir Patrick Mayhew. It is equally echoed in the great spectrum of the Christian Churches gathered here this evening. I salute particularly Archbishop Robin Eames, in whose cathedral we worship, Cardinal Cahal Daly, leaders of the Methodist, Presbyterian and other Churches in Ireland. Such an all-Ireland gathering is only eclipsed in the universality of Rugby Football, so I am told!

It is moving to this theme of a celebration for the whole of Ireland that brings me more specifically to my theme. It is encapsulated in a verse from the second reading: 'With all these witnesses to faith around us like a cloud, we must throw off every encumbrance and run with resolution the race for which we are entered, our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish.'

The writer of these well-known words was, as we know, writing in the midst of great uncertainties and anxieties. He does something which we often do when we want to encourage people. That is we supply a context and remind them of what has happened in the past. His catalogue of giants of the faith includes soldiers like Gideon and Samson; politicians and statesmen like Barak and David; prophets and religious leaders like Samuel and others. And then quite deliberately he leaves the great and the good behind and speaks of the innumerable company of very ordinary men and women who, he says in a matchless phrase, 'were too good for a world like this'. Finally, having surveyed the inspirational background of the past he urges them to look ahead: 'Fix your eyes on Jesus on whom faith depends'.

Looking back, as is right to do on such an occasion as this, is important since it reminds us of the trust we have received and of the trust which God requires from us all. Indeed, as we look back we can see how clearly our countries have been both locked together by faith and yet separated too by that same faith. Patrick himself was well aware of the dangers of isolation. He wrote:

The wickedness of the wicked has prevailed over us. We have been treated like outsiders. Perhaps they do not believe that we have the same God as Father. They think it derogatory that we are Irish. As the text says, Do you not have one God? Why has each one deserted his neighbour?

These powerful words still speak directly to us today. They remind the English among us of our need for penitence; all too often we have treated Ireland and the Irish as outsiders. It is a great tribute to that champion of justice in Ireland, Edmund Burke, that to his dying day he remained both a loyal Englishman and a loyal Irishman. Would that others in earlier generations had seen how inextricably the fortunes of these two islands have been bound together. Bound together inextricably not by the bonds of over-weening struggles for power. Bound together instead by a true sense of sharing in a common heritage of faith — which is essentially greater than the way we have separated into difference Catholic and Protestant alternatives. It is surely a rediscovery of that trust given to us by God that is now most desperately needed as you seek to work for a new understanding of community in this island to which Patrick brought the gospel.

Looking back is not enough of course. Once we have recognised the heritage we possess our task is to contextualise it in our own day. We survey a world burdened with sin, human tragedy and weakness on the one hand and inspired with new possibilities and hope on the other. It is frequently the case that the two go together. Here in Ireland they exist side by side. So, the physical beauty of Ireland has often been mocked by pictures of gaping holes in buildings following explosions or by the presence of the armed forces making their unending patrols. Or again there is the intelligence, beauty and hope on the face of a child paralleled by an opposed ugly violence in young people torn apart by a legacy bequeathed to them by their past. It is in the area of divided community more than any other than you have experienced profound tragedy in this island. Division and distrust did not begin this century, but reflecting upon the civil war of 1922. W. B. Yeats in memorable lines commented:

All is changed, changed utterly
A terrible beauty is born.

It is in the realm of community relations that the inheritance of past years have cast most bitterness. Not only have political leaders been prominent in condemning violence as the way to solve social and political problems but it is well known throughout the world that Christian leaders here have been outstanding in their courage. Cardinal Daly, of course, together with Archbishop Robin Eames and significant Presbyterian leaders and others. In a recent address, Archbishop Eames has placed this issue at the top of the agenda. He points to the unparalleled opportunities presented by the current cessation of violence. In a powerful reflection he said: '... within the whole area of community relations we must recognise that the culture of violence is a much wider concept than terrorism alone. The violence of words and the violence of attitudes are equally dangerous.' He was right to draw attention to the violence of words. Some leaders here and elsewhere may not have intended to incite violence but the hatred, bigotry and fear inspired by their rhetoric may have contributed more significantly than we shall ever know to the spiral of violence.

All of us in Britain and Ireland have been profoundly marked by these years of violence. But we have been equally marked by the moves of these past weeks. I realise that there remains much nervousness and uncertainty within so many different places in the community here in Northern Ireland. It does seem to me that it is of paramount importance that Christian people, and the Churches offer a sacramental lead. Love, tolerance and the building of trust within the community lie at the heart of the gospel. As we celebrate Patrick, so let us remember his gift to everyone within Ireland since his time; it is the gift of the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel in the heart of whose message is reconciliation.

That brings me to the last point. It is not enough to look back or simply around — we look ahead. And the writer says: 'Fix your eyes on Jesus'. We as Christians know instantly what the writer meant. Jesus Christ brought about a new relationship with God by living among us, suffering and dying for us and rising again to give us hope and new possibilities. Whether Catholics, Anglicans or Protestants of whatever denomination, we share a great hope which transcends all the divisions of the past and all quarrels of the present. Of all people, Christians should have the courage to cross the human barriers of sin, and leap over the walls of separation. Peace is never a wall that separates — it is a bridge which unites.

Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, another bringer of reconciliation in a different tension-filled part of the world, told this moving tale of an encounter at the inauguration of President Mandela. A young white soldier came up to him and said 'I want to speak to you Archbishop'. He said, 'I'm a Afrikaaner and a Sergeant in the Army, I just want to touch you'.

Huddleston responded: 'Surely today we can be rejoicing'. But before he had a chance to continue, the soldier said: 'I have to say that I'm deeply ashamed at what my people have done to the black people of this country and I want to apologise. We did terrible things, and we knew what we were doing. I want to thank you because you're the person who opened our eyes to what we were doing.'

Such an encounter required trust and confidence. When each of us individually, and as part of our own community, can offer such penitence, then we shall know that the gospel for which Christ died, and which Patrick came to preach, has touched our hearts.