

A Pastoral Letter from the Bishops whose Dioceses cover Northern Ireland which we would suggest is to be read in all parish churches on Sunday 22 September 2024, the day following the Feast of St Matthew.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?”

“Jesus replied ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind’. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ All the Law and the Prophets depend on these commandments”. (Matthew 22:36-40)

This Pastoral letter comes in response to the recent street protests, rise of hate crime and intimidation, and deliberate spreading of fear around topics of racial diversity and immigration. Christians have specific obligations to society in general and also to those from different countries and cultures who share our neighbourhoods.

We enjoy an incalculable blessing by living in a free society in which we have many opportunities to contribute to our collective well-being. As citizens we have a responsibility to deepen democratic culture, not to divide it. This requires working for the common good, using the many ways open to us to work with civility and courtesy for a better life for all, most especially for the next generation.

The Christian attitude to society is based on the fundamental belief in the sanctity of every human life and the inherent dignity of every human person; all are made in the image and likeness of God. It was CS Lewis who said that, next to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, the holiest thing we will encounter in our everyday lives is another human individual.

It is often forgotten that this outlook (on which the very principle of “universal human rights” depends) has its origins in the thought world of the Hebrew Scriptures and was embodied in the life of Jesus Christ. It was first fully articulated by the Apostle Paul and much of what the Church has believed for centuries is now implicit in the language, laws and practice of secular society. Thus, to threaten or deny the fundamental dignity and equality of each human being, regardless of their race, creed or citizenship status, is unequivocally sub-Christian.

In fact, Christians have the advantage of having been given explicit teaching and principles on our responsibilities to our fellow humans. This teaching finds its clearest and most compelling expression in the Parable of the Good Samaritan and its eternal embodiment in the life, voluntary sacrifice and resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ. It is no coincidence that that parable was told by Jesus in answer to a direct question *“Who is my neighbour?”*

Our Lord and His Apostles never intended that the Church which he founded and of which He is the Head should be a group of people who were withdrawn from society, owing obligations only to fellow believers. On the contrary, the little communities of believers who constituted the early Church were to be the places where the highest form of civic responsibility was to be learned and practiced. For the follower of Christ, the needs of others are to be prioritised over our own needs. Church was to be a place where each person was treasured, where people would share with others the unconditional love and acceptance that they had known through Christ: Jew and Gentile, slave and free, men and women. The clearest summary of that are words with which you will all be familiar and which are repeated each time we celebrate the Eucharist:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your strength and your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets”.

Among the many virtues which can be nurtured by constant reflection on this foundational teaching is to make Christians alive to the times when people in civic or public life are using language that demeans or diminishes human beings, or when they are telling lies about what human beings (or

indeed God) are actually like. This should especially be the case when public debate is focused on creating fear and scapegoats. People sitting in our pews on Sundays, living in our localities or serving in our communities who come from different cultures and countries, or who are simply people of colour, should never have to wonder are they people whose presence adds richness or diversity to our communities or are they someone else's 'legitimate concern'.

It is in that spirit that we wish to reassure people from other cultures or countries or simply people of colour who may hear or read this Pastoral Letter that we appreciate your presence and the grace which you bring to us.

We wish also to thank all clergy and parishioners who have been working very hard on the ground, and often in challenging circumstances or even in a hostile environment, to care for all their neighbours. You are people who have been called after His Name and in your acts of love and courage have been faithful witnesses to His Name and a blessing to your communities.

What can we do in our everyday lives to put the teaching of the Parable of the Good Samaritan into effect?

-Most obviously we must include people from different backgrounds in the life and witness of our parishes; there is much we can learn from them

-It is also best to 'think local' and be aware of people's heightened concerns at this time. A little note of encouragement and friendliness might be less alarming than a knock on the door.

-Where people are obviously fearful, even of leaving the house, stand with them visibly and, if necessary courageously

-The Irish Council of Churches of which the Church of Ireland was a founder member, has recently published a Handbook entitled 'From every Nation' on these matters and which would be a very useful long term resource,

-the Diocese of Down and Dromore have also published a booklet, which takes its title from the words of the Parable of the Good Samaritan "Go and do likewise".

There will of course be other ways of helping that you will be aware of in your local circumstances and we would encourage you to be creative and sensitive in whatever you decide to do to witness to the relentless love of God for all who are made in His image.

In Christ

+John Armagh, +Andrew Derry and Raphoe, +David Down and Dromore, +Ian Clogher, +George Connor