

Brothers and sisters in Christ

Today, 28 April, is when my translation from the Diocese of Clogher takes effect; on paper at least, I am now your new Bishop. So, hello.

As you can imagine, because of current restrictions on movement, I won't be able to move into the See House in Armagh until things return to some sort of normality. So, you might say I have ceased being the Archbishop-Designate and have become the Archbishop-Virtual. Apart from the sadness of not being able to say a proper "goodbye" to the Diocese of Clogher my other frustration is not being able to say other than this informal "hello" to you. Nevertheless, these are very minor inconveniences compared to the difficulties which so many people around us and among us are enduring.

More perplexing (for me at any rate) will be my inability to travel around the diocese to meet with clergy and parishioners in your natural habitats, until restrictions are eased. I will be able to do a certain amount of persecuting people by phone and videoconferencing, but that is no substitute for getting out to be with you in worship and in work. Pray God that will be possible sooner rather than later.

As you may know, since my election, I've been working closely with Archdeacon Terry Scott to try to get to know a more about the Diocese, and we have also been pooling resources a bit between Armagh and Clogher (and will continue to do so ) while the present strange circumstances continue. So now is an appropriate time to thank the Archdeacon for his incredible diligence, and the wisdom which he has brought to his role as Commissary during the time when you have had no bishop. I look forward to working closely with him and with the whole Diocesan team as we grope our way through the fog of this emergency and, the Lord being our helper, towards the sunny uplands of a more settled time.

At this point I would wish to pay my own tribute to my predecessor, Archbishop Richard Clarke. I had the privilege of working closely with Archbishop Richard for nine years in the House of Bishops, and have learned a great deal from his example. I cannot thank him enough for the encouragement he gave to me when I first joined the House of Bishops. I am also very grateful to him for leaving the Diocese in good heart and spirit. I would not pretend to be able to step into his shoes. As you will find, you have exchanged a thoroughbred for a dray horse.

Perhaps, like me, many of you will be feeling a little confused and apprehensive about the future; in your families, in your workplaces and in your parishes. And there is no doubt that much will change and will have to change. Like all change some of it will be for the better and some for the worse. But whatever remains the same, and whatever changes, let's resolve now to continue our worship of God in the Diocese of Armagh "not only with our lips but in our lives" and to strengthen our discipleship of Jesus Christ, wherever that may lead us.

One of the slogans we have got used to hearing over the past five or six weeks is that "lives are in your hands". I hope that we can make taking things into our own hands a bit of a habit. One hundred and fifty years ago, at the time of Disestablishment (I promise this is the last time I'll mention Disestablishment) everyone, including some of our own leaders, had all but written off the Church of Ireland. Some people are doing the same again now, wondering when, or even if, we will ever get people back to church. The full answer to that will depend on how prolonged the restrictions on gathering for worship will be. But I have every confidence that, although some things may be done differently, we will emerge stronger in our faith and in our service to God and His Church.

In the past few weeks we have had to learn how to do things differently. And in doing that we have been attracting numbers of people to online worship which our churches probably couldn't hold if they all turned up on a Sunday. And the last person we want to be like is the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal son, jealous because of the Father's generosity to any who turn to him. God's Grace can live where we often are not at home. We've lowered the step into church a bit. Let's see how we can make something of that for the future.

But that's not the whole story. Like many clergy I've found that the period of restrictions and social distancing has made life even busier than usual. We've had to do old things in new ways and find ways to do completely new things. But there has also been a quietness both in towns and in the countryside that we haven't seen or heard for decades. Every day our roads and footpaths have looked like a Sunday in 1955. For the past nine years I've been living in a field on the Tyrone/Fermanagh border where the coming of Spring usually consists of the sound of a multitude of chainsaws that no man can number, alternating with the "thump, thump," which accompanies the erection of post and wire fencing.

This year it has been a bit different. Sometimes it has been so quiet that as I've been working in my study the only sound I can hear is the steady (I'm delighted to say) beat of my heart. But even then it isn't long before the almost inaudible buzz of my subconscious rises to the surface, bringing the deeply buried fears and worries to the forefront of my mind.

And where have I found comfort then? Oddly enough in the online presence of so many of my colleagues here in Clogher and elsewhere; looking, sometimes nervously, into the camera of a smart phone. Parish clergy, showing by the modest robes they are wearing, and the words of Common Prayer which they are using, that they are set apart by God in His Church, to offer him worship and to intercede on behalf of His people and His world.

I have learned many things about myself, about the world and about God during this period of unusual activity mixed with unusual quietness. Some of the things I've learned have been trivial; that one Gillette Mach 3 razor can last for three weeks. Or that, when I'm the duty cook, toad-in-the hole isn't as easy to make as you might think.

But some slightly more profound. That God continues to speak in the still, small voice of the memorable words of the Book of Common Prayer. No rousing hymns; no familiar church surroundings; no beautiful architecture or ornament. Just the words. Especially the words of the Service of Compline, the last service of the night which the monks sang on the hill of Armagh centuries ago, and which has the staying power to live fully in the twenty first century. It is an Office made for this moment of connected solitude and of God's protective presence through the night.

I look forward to the day when I can share it with you.