

Sermon by Archbishop Richard Clarke - Kilbride 150th anniversary

Sunday 10 June 2018

Although much of your celebration today is centred around this beautiful church, dedicated to Saint Brigid - Saint Brigid – 150 years ago, you are also celebrating a long Christian history as there were a number of Christian churches which pre-date this church of Kilbride.

As it happens, I have a long acquaintance with Saint Brigid, having been Bishop of Meath and Kildare for some sixteen years, and therefore understandably worshipping with some regularity in St Brigid's Cathedral, for your Brigid is indeed "Brigid of Kildare". And a rather formidable lady Brigid evidently was!

To celebrate your relationship with Saint Brigid here in Kilbride today is, in part at least, to celebrate what we might think of as the *universality* of the ministry of the whole Church of Jesus Christ, in every time and in every place. It is the reminder that the Church is essentially the same Church and the ministry is essentially the same ministry in every century and in every culture. Brigid speaks to us from down the centuries and from an Ireland that bears no outward resemblance whatsoever to the Ireland of 2018 or even that of 1868 when this church was built. But yet what we celebrate, at one level, is the self-same ministry that is here today – the ministry of Jesus Christ on earth, exercised through men and women in every age and every conceivable culture.

But Brigid is of course more than a *symbol* of Christian ministry. She was an individual person, a real person. As I have suggested already, she was a very powerful woman indeed, powerful and influential in a time when the ministry of women was, we might say, more than a little *muted*. But there seems to have been little about Brigid that was either muted or submissive. People of either gender did not take her on lightly – bishops in particular would have had no chance at all before the might of the Abbess of Kildare. She found them of some use for ordaining but for little else (which may seem reasonable enough). She would no doubt have been somewhat pleased that the first woman bishop in the Church of Ireland would now be presiding in her cathedral.

Brigid was a disciple of determination and courage but then so were those who chose to build this church in 1868, for this was far from a comfortable time for the Church of Ireland. In 1868, the Church of Ireland had little reason grounds for great confidence. The tithes which had buttressed the Church (having extracted from the whole population of the island and not simply the Church of Ireland) had virtually disappeared, the Church had been reorganised at central level with its financial support so reduced. By 1868, it was becoming clear that in the not too distant future, the Church of Ireland (which represented only one-eighth of the population of the island) could not remain as the state church, and within a year of this beautiful church being built, the Church of Ireland was disestablished, cast adrift by the government in Westminster to sink or swim as a voluntary body, relying entirely on the good will and financial support of its members.

Today is a testimony to the courage and commitment of our forerunners in 1868. It is something to celebrate but it is also something on which to reflect as, in 2018, we are called to face the future, even as we celebrate the heritage we have been given.

The reality that, even amidst our thankfulness and our celebrations, we are not living in 1868 or even 1968. We are living in a society that has ceased to think of Christianity (or religion in any recognisable sense) as a necessary default position for normal people. If we are to show any gratitude for the past or understanding of the past, disciples in every generation must live with the reality of their own context, wherever that may be. And so we must bear the reality of the Church of today - a Church which for many people is fussily answering questions that are just not being asked. The only way that any Christian community can serve its existing members spiritually is when it turns its face outwards, and seeks to care for those around it and to share itself, with coherence, with courage and credibility, with those who

need desperately to find hope and love and direction, and something other than isolation - the greatest dis-ease of our time - here in Kilbride or Ballyclare as much as anywhere else. And, as a recent study in our sister Church of England has discovered, people in general do not seem to have become less spiritual by nature, *but* if they do not find an authentic spirituality within a Church community they will seek it elsewhere, and sometimes in the most bizarre and even dangerous of forms.

And so as today we celebrate one hundred and fifty years of this church building, and as the Church of Ireland a whole will next year be celebrating one hundred and fifty years since its disestablishment, we have to recall that we are on a journey but we are on more than a continuing journey. We are on a pilgrimage. Some of you have recently returned from a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. As it happens, at the same time I was also on a pilgrimage, but to another place. The Roman Catholic Archbishop of Armagh and I were with a group of young people on pilgrimage to Messines in Belgium, to a place where in the course of the First World War, thousands of young men from all parts of this island died in battle. Yet we called the pilgrimage "a pilgrimage of hope". As Christian disciples we can never be without hope, and we can even draw hope from the example of those in times past whose commitment to one another and care for one another lifted them above despair.

We must live in the present and even celebrate the present by looking out beyond the present and reaching out towards God's future for us. It must be with courage. It must be in faith. And always as pilgrims. So often we behave as though all we have to concern ourselves with is today or possibly tomorrow. The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard once wrote that it is almost like a ship we have handed over to the cook and made him the captain. What the captain is communicating is not our route, but rather what is on the menu for tonight's dinner. We can easily forget to ask of God that most serious of all questions, "*What are we not yet, that you are calling us to be?*" That is the question that no parish and no Church should ever stop asking of God. It can indeed lead us to think about things differently and even to do things differently.

If you think about it, it is certainly true that people are at their best when they are not too comfortable, not too safe and not over-content with themselves. In the Hebrew scriptures, we read of Abraham's journey into the unknown, of Moses leading the Israelites through the desert, of Elijah lodging in a vulnerable cave at Horeb; In the Christian scriptures, we see John the Baptist in the desert and its insecurity, and Saint Paul on his constant journeying. If our sole concern is with security and certainty, we are losing contact with God.

We have much for which to thank God in our celebration this afternoon – for the heritage with which we have been entrusted here in Kilbride, for the faithfulness of those who had the courage to build for the future in an uncertain time, and for the dedication of those who have served this parish with loyalty and energy over 150 years. We do thank God for them, but we do them the greater honour, and we pay God the greater reverence when we face into the future with a cold-eyed realism about our world and our society and our role within it, and with an invincible trust in the God who is the God not only of peace and of hope, but the God also of the rigours and the uncertainties of the pilgrimage and of the journey and who is calling us to journey with him.