Enniskillen Cathedral

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I’m very grateful to Dean Kenny for inviting me to come and share in worship with you. He and I knew each other when he was in Brackaville – Coalisland and I was Rector of Seagoe Parish in Portadown. Difficult days they were for both of us and I always admired his courage in leadership and his openness.

Enniskillen is known as a special. I was very moved by the picture of Her Majesty the Queen crossing the road which separates the two churches with the dove of peace overhead. Symbolism which meant much more than just the crossing of a road.

It’s a long time since I was here. Sixty years certainly since I joined the choir when Tony Smith was Organist and Dean Tom Clements was the Rector. More than sixty years since I put my head through the woodwork of the gallery back there and found that I couldn’t get it out again. I was confirmed here by Bishop Alan Buchanan in 1964. Those were the days before the secular society began to nibble at the edges – and more than the edges - of church life. Church life felt strong and secure – churches were at the heart of their community.

That experience in the choir turned out to be foundational for me. I learned about music but more about faith. Children’s choirs are risky places. If you open your lips to sing the praises of God you will also open your heart to the love of God. And you will be at risk of ending up where I ended up.

I’ve spent a lot of time in my life exploring the roots of faith with people – so to come back here leads me to think about my own faith. They say that faith is caught and not taught. So what did the child in the choir caught of faith here.

I must have heard that beautiful passage from the book of Ruth – which tells us that faith lives in the context of relationships. Naomi tries to release her two daughters in law from any obligation to her. And Ruth replies with those beautiful words about belonging

‘Where you go I will go

Where you lodge, I will lodge

Your people shall be my people

And your God my God.

Jesus is asked, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’

The answer is in this remarkable commandment – that we love God and our neighbour as ourselves – or to put in in the terms with which I began, ‘We love God and cross the road.’ It is simple and direct.

As time went on, I learned other things which became also fundamental to my life and my calling. One obviously, because of the difficult times through which we have lived is the Christian calling to peacemaking, healing and reconciliation. Another is about what we call redemption. People do and say extraordinary things – sometimes hard and hurtful things. You wonder how you can relate to them or stir their hearts to kindness and love. Christian faith speaks constantly about forgiveness and new start – about the fact that no situation however dreadful is beyond the power to God somehow to bring unexpected good out of it.

The little boy in the choir lived, as we all do at that age if we are fortunate, a simple life with loving parents, brother and sister and cats. I absorbed the beauty of Fermanagh. I absorbed Christian faith.

Now we all live in more secular times – times when churches are no longer full and aren’t automatically at the centre of their communities. Faith is challenged – and tested – either by the hostility of others or by their indifference. As I look back on my childhood, I can say that, without knowing what was coming, I could sense that troubled times were on their way. But I couldn’t have imagined how difficult a place the world would become – as we face big issues like global warming, migration and the moral and ethical questions like abortion and assisted dying.

Faith does not provide immediate answers to these questions. But…… if the great commandment is ‘Love God and neighbour’ then I have to be concerned about people whose lives and livelihoods are threatened by rising sea levels and about migrants at risk as they cross the Mediterranean. I have to think about the rights and wrongs of very complex medical and ethical questions. When I was a child I was aware of the poignancy of Remembrance Sunday which comes next week – the Second War was just over ten years ago and the First about forty. But this huge range of questions and the very abrasive political culture in which they are considered would have been unimaginable.

I value greatly the roots of faith which became part of my life here. I have carried them through an extraordinary range of places and situations in my life, my ministry and my time as a church leader. I know that many of you too will share those roots of faith with me – knowing that what we are called to do is to love God and cross the road.