

One hundred and fifty years ago found the Church of Ireland in a time of great uncertainty. After the rebellion of 1798, the Act of Union and the abolition of the Irish Parliament, the Church of Ireland had been united with the Church of England and enjoyed the power and privilege of the Established Church in Ireland.

As part of his solution of the ‘Irish Problem’, Gladstone, the Prime Minister at Westminster at the time, moved to remove the status of Establishment from the Church of Ireland. Opponents at the time thought that this spelt catastrophe for the Church of Ireland. There is a table in the house of the Archbishop of Dublin that came from Gladstone’s house in London. It bears the inscription, ‘Around this table Gladstone and his associates plotted the destruction of the Ancient and Apostolic Church of Ireland.’ And so 150 years ago, the Church of Ireland stood on the brink of disestablishment, soon to be stripped of much of its wealth and removed from positions of power within the State – for example Bishops of the Church of Ireland no longer sat in the House of Lords.

The Church, previously subject to Parliament, had to establish new forms of governance. The General Synod, consisting of Bishops, representatives of the clergy and laity came into being along with lay involvement in the election of Bishops and Rectors. In its day, this was quite revolutionary, some arguing that the Church of Ireland was thinking itself out of the Anglican Communion. At this time the Constitution was drawn up and approved at a General Convention held in Dublin in 1870. One of my predecessors as Rector of Ahoghill was one of the Clerical Secretaries. A

Preamble and Declaration, printed at the back of your Prayer Books (page 776), was produced that articulated the basic principles underlying these developments. I just want to mention two features.

2. The Church of Ireland will continue to minister the doctrine, and sacraments, and the discipline of Christ, as the Lord hath commanded; and will maintain inviolate the three orders of bishops, priests or presbyters, and deacons in the sacred ministry.

And

The Church of Ireland, deriving its authority from Christ, Who is the Head over all things to the Church, doth declare that a General Synod of the Church of Ireland, consisting of the archbishops and bishops, and of representatives of the clergy and laity, shall have chief legislative power therein, and such administrative power as may be necessary for the Church, and consistent with its episcopal constitution.

What we have is the Church of Ireland, evaluating how to maintain faithful to its historic foundations in the face of rapidly changing circumstances. This whole thing is summed up rather nicely in the forward of a book by one of the Taizé Community that I picked up in the course of our visit this summer.

‘.. we must listen again and again to the questions raised by our own time, while remembering that the experience of centuries remains a treasure upon which we may rely.’ *Love imperfectly known – Br Emmanuel: p viii*

The Church of Ireland has designated this Sunday as ‘Vocation Sunday’. It’s purpose is two fold:

To put forward the possibility of ministry to members of the Church
To reflect on the ministry of the Church, both lay and ordained in the life of the Church.

As we keep on reminding ourselves, we live in a rapidly changing society. Our present Parish structures which have their origins in rural ministry; one male

priest, operating in one Church with fixed Parish boundaries, and the style of ministry that went with that, which worked very well in the society in which I was born; all these are coming under strain. The reality of both partners in a household working, with its impact on family life, has had its impact on the midweek life of Parishes and Sunday worship. All this quite apart from a disillusionment in society at large with Church as an institution and faith itself, a feeling that it is all irrelevant to life as lived in the present. So ministry, and the context in which it operates, is facing fundamental challenges.

There are many examples where the Church is meeting these challenges that are summarised in a video produced by the Church of Ireland which I am showing at the 10:30 service and which can be accessed on the sermon section of the Parish website. In this we see examples of how, building on the foundations of the historic ministry of the Church, the Church has listened to questions asked by our current situation.

Video ‘Its your call’

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ildk_FvVOtk#action=share

This has spoken particularly of the ordained ministry. But ministry is the vocation of the whole Church; ordained ministry will be more and more about enabling Church members to identify and use their gifts in the life of the Church, in society at large. We were recently blessed here in Howth by the ministry of Tom O’Brien as he exercised his ministry in the context of his work in the office of the Minister of Health. I think in the future we will see more collaborative ministry, individual Parishes sharing resources, sharing talents.

In the midst of the challenges placed upon us, I see great opportunities for development and growth in the ministry of the Church.

I go back to the challenges placed upon this Church by Disestablishment 150 years ago. There were some in the Church who saw, in the erosion of privilege, only impending disaster. There were others who saw opportunities and this ancient and apostolic Church emerged stronger, better able to serve the society in which it witnessed.

Gracious God,

You have called me to life and gifted me in many ways.

Through Baptism You have sent me to continue the mission of Jesus by sharing my love with others. Strengthen me to respond to Your call each day.

Help me to become all You desire of me. Inspire me to make a difference in others' lives.

Lead me to choose the way of life You have planned for me.

Open the hearts of all to listen to Your call.

Fill all with Your Holy Spirit that we may have listening hearts and the courage to respond to You.

I ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.