

February 16, 2021



Image of the day
St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall



*Former president of Ireland Mary McAleese.
File photograph courtesy The Irish Times*

Former president claims the church is failing those who die unbaptised before or at birth

The Catholic Church's failure to reflect its concern for the right to life of the unborn with a similar concern for the right to eternal life of those who die unbaptised before or at birth has been highlighted by former president Mary McAleese, Patsy McGarry writes in the Irish Times.

“These are not rare or exceptional cases. There are tens of millions of them every year. They die by clinical abortion, spontaneous miscarriage, still-birth or from fatal conditions which cause them to die in utero or soon after birth. The vast majority are unbaptised,” she said in an article for the current edition of the Tablet weekly.

February 16, 2021

“This great assertive champion of the unborn, never short of powerful words in defence of their right to life, retreats into mumbling hesitancy on the subject of their right to life with God after death,” she said.

The church teaches that “baptism wipes away all prior sin and even though the unborn child and the born infant are incapable of sin the Church teaches that, thanks to the sin of Adam, everyone is born ‘with a fallen human nature and tainted by original sin’,” she added.

The church taught that a person “who dies in a state of original sin ‘receives his eternal retribution . . . at the very moment of his death, in a particular judgement that refers his life . . . to everlasting damnation.’ In other words they go to hell,” she said.

‘Grounds for hope’

The former president added that since this seemed glaringly harsh in the case of blameless babies, and caused untold additional grief to bereaved parents, theologians as recently as 2007 had concluded that there were “grounds for hope” the unbaptised among the unborn and among infants may go to heaven.

“This is where Church teaching stands today: hesitant, unsure, pathetic,” she said. “It needs to do better, much better. The huge effort expended in external advocacy on behalf of the right to life of the unborn has no internal Church equivalent on behalf of the right to salvation of the innocent unbaptised dead child.

February 16, 2021

“The Catholic Church is known worldwide as a staunch defender of the right to life of the unborn. Its leaders regularly lock horns with governments and pro-choice advocates, challenging the liberalisation of abortion laws and condemning Catholic politicians who fail to defend Church teaching.

“Even people whose knowledge of the Catholic Church is negligible are aware of its views on abortion. They dominate contemporary Church-State discourse, even making their way into a strident warning from the US bishops to the new Catholic President of the United States Joe Biden on the day of his inauguration,” she said.

“Bishops,” she added, “are never more comfortable than when they are preaching to the world from the moral high ground of a Church which believes itself to have been missioned by God. The Church’s mission is the salvation of souls and salvation is fundamentally about life after death.”

New Chief Executive Officer of the Church Army

The Ven Dr Peter Rouch has been appointed Chief Executive Officer of the Church Army

The Archbishop of York, Most Rev Stephen Cottrell who is Chair of the Church Army Board writes "Peter has been a long-time supporter of Church Army, having been involved with the Southampton Centre of Mission during his time as Archdeacon of Bournemouth.



Peter brings the right mix of skills, experience and spiritual leadership needed to help Church Army on the next stage of its journey and I am sure you will join with me in welcoming Peter as he takes up his post, most likely at the beginning of May.”

80 year old Parish reader raises £7k for charities with 80-mile walk down memory lane

A retired Castlederg GP has raised over £7,000 for charity by completing an 80-mile walking challenge.

To mark his 80th birthday, Dr Morris Brown walked four miles each day for 20 days to visit landmarks in the town which reminded him of his long career.

February 16, 2021

He is a committed member of the Church of Ireland in Derg, where he has been a parish reader for 40 years.

In his daily walks he visited the local rectory, where his close friend Canon Walter

Quill had lived, then past the old and new surgeries in the town where he worked, as well as Silverdale Nursing Home, which he founded and owned for 15 years with his former medical partner, the late Dr Jim Garvey.

Finally, he visited the old Derg Valley Hospital, where he carried out accident and emergency services throughout the Troubles and where two of his children were born.

He is now hopefully well on the way to reach his original target of £8,000.

The money will be split between the RNLI, which he and his late wife Marguerite supported since he came to Castlederg some 40 years ago. She passed away in September 2001.

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February 16, 2021

The other half of the cash will go to the Castlederg Patient Comfort and Terminally Ill Fund, which has raised around £500,000 over the past 20 years to help those with terminal illnesses.

Dr Brown was founder and chairman of the fund, and is now treasurer.

He was joined on the first and last days of the challenge by his daughter Suzanne, a PE teacher at Lisneal College.

He said: "Because of Covid-19 I realised that I could not have the usual celebration for an 80th birthday.

"So I decided to do something special by raising money for good causes.

"My walk around Castlederg was really worthwhile.

"People were generous in all kinds of ways.

"I sincerely thank everyone who gave me donations and who supported me in any way.

"I still walk between two and three miles a day for recreation and fitness, but in the short-term I don't have any more big fundraising ideas.

"In that respect, maybe it's time to put my feet up for a while!"

February 16, 2021

Armagh Cathedral - Conferment of Dean Shane Forster



In a short online service (via Zoom) on Sunday 14th February 2021, Canon Shane Forster, previously Rector of Ballymore Parish in Tandragee, was conferred to his new position as the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh.

Archbishop John McDowell paid tribute to Shane's abilities and skills as a clergy person and also his hard work as Executive Chaplain to successive Archbishops of Armagh. Prayers were said for God's blessing on the Forster family and the ongoing ministry and witness of our Cathedral Church.

The necessary Declarations were made by Canon Shane Forster, by Canon Colin Moore as Provincial Registrar and Canon Norman Porteus, the Precentor of the Cathedral. The service ended with The Blessing and the traditional round of applause for the new Dean.

Alf McCreery of the Belfast Telegraph in conversation with Canon Shane Forster.

Published in the Belfast Telegraph on the eve of Canon Forster's conferment as Dean of Armagh.

Adopting my two children has been the best experience of my whole life'

Canon Shane Forster will be installed tomorrow as Dean of Armagh and Keeper of the Robinson Library. He is married to Kathleen and they have two adoptive children, Timothy (13) and Emma (9).

Q Can you tell us something about your background?

A I was born in 1972, in Belfast, the year often referred to as the worst of the Troubles. Both my parents are from Church of Ireland backgrounds, my father Tom in Co Cavan and my mother Carolyn in Belfast. I have a younger brother, Mark. I was educated at Downey House and Methodist College Belfast before continuing my studies at Queen's University and Trinity College Dublin. I was ordained in 1996 and served my curacy in Drumglass Parish, Dungannon, before becoming rector of the parochial group of Donaghmore and

February 16, 2021

Donaghmore Upper in 1999 and then rector of Ballymore Parish, Tandragee, in 2006. I have been chaplain to four successive Archbishops of Armagh and I am a Canon of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin.

Q What about your family life?

A I met my wife Kathleen in Dungannon when I was curate there and she was the organist. Kathleen was a primary school principal until we adopted our two amazing children, Timothy (13) and Emma (9). Both were born in St Petersburg in Russia and came home to Northern Ireland when they were babies. When we were approved as adopters, we opted for inter-country adoption. It just turned out that Timothy was in St Petersburg and, when we decided to adopt again, we asked that the child would be from the same city, hence we landed back in St Petersburg to adopt Emma.

Q How and when did you come to faith?

A My parents are both active church-goers, as were their parents before them. I was baptised and confirmed in Belfast Cathedral and was also a chorister. Faith and Church have always been part of my life.

In the cathedral, the scriptures and prayer, alongside liturgy and music, shaped my theological thinking. When I was 16, I felt a very real sense of God's call to ministry and was ordained at 24.

Q Does this faith play a real part in your life, or is it only for Sundays?



A My faith in God gives me direction, fills me with hope and strengthens me for the journey. It's simply part of me and shapes how I think and see the world and other people.

Q Have you ever had a crisis of faith, or a gnawing doubt about your faith?

A I have had moments where I have had questions and struggles, but have never given up on my faith. God has also never given up on me.

Q Have you ever been angry with God and, if so, why?

A Not angry, but at points I have not fully understood why certain things happened. Often, on looking back, the bigger picture was revealed.

Q Do you ever get criticised for your faith and are you able to live with that criticism?

A I have encountered people who didn't understand how faith could be such a central part of someone's life. Yet, those occasions have often provided great opportunities to talk about God.

Q Are you ever ashamed of your own Church, or denomination?

A Having grown up in the Church of Ireland and served in ordained ministry for nearly 25 years, I am aware of its failings and achievements. As a denomination, I think it has been prepared to acknowledge its imperfections and humbly and realistically accept the challenges before it.

Q Are you afraid to die, or can you look beyond death?

A I have no fear of death and live in the moment, but I always look to the future. I trust in Jesus Christ as my saviour and redeemer. I believe in the resurrection and a life hereafter in the nearer presence of God, which will be life without pain and sorrow, but filled with love and light.

Q What about other denominations and faiths?

A I have had the privilege of working with the Church leaders in Northern Ireland for many years and the opportunity, through the Church, to visit places as diverse as North Korea and Burkina Faso. I have learned much through listening and shared conversations.

Q Would you be comfortable in stepping out from your own faith and trying to learn something from other people?

A It is always important to engage with others, even if they have a different vision of the world. Jesus himself loved to talk and listen to all He met on the road. That engagement with others didn't change His message.

Q Are the Churches here are fulfilling their mission?

A The Churches are collectively and individually trying their best, in a rapidly changing world, to fulfil the mission to spread the Gospel.

Q Why are so many people turning their backs on organised religion?

A We are quickly losing our sense of community and how we relate to others. Many people still have some sort of sense of God, but in the busyness of life, they have stopped thinking about things eternal.

Q Has religion helped or hindered the people of Northern Ireland?

A The 18th-century poet Alexander Pope wrote: "To err is human; to forgive, divine." The Church, through its various denominations, has made many mistakes, due to being made up of sinful, mortal beings. And yet it has also brought reconciliation, healing and light into the midst of division, suffering and darkness.

Q What is your favourite film, book and music?

A I always have a crime novel on the go, alongside a biography and something theological. I enjoy action adventure movies and my musical taste ranges from Bach to Abba.

Q Where do you feel closest to God?

A In a quiet church building that has been a spiritual home for generations of people.

Q What inscription would you like on your gravestone, if any?

A He walked by faith, lived in hope and acted in love.

Q Finally, have you any major regrets?

A With the knowledge and experience I have now, I would love to have adopted more children. Adopting my two children has been the best experience of my whole life.

Broadcasts, resources and webinars

BBC Radio Ulster Morning Service from Ballymoney - Morning Service on BBC Radio Ulster on Sunday February 28 will be led by the Rev Stuart Reid, curate in the Parish of Ballymoney, Finvoy and Rasharkin. The service gets underway at 10.15am

February 16, 2021

Theological Conversations up for Lent. - Every Sunday in Lent from 5.30pm, either myself or Sarah Williamson will be in conversation with some thinkers about theology. We're having these conversations because that's the place where lots of wisdom happens. The topics include: Theology and gender; theology and climate justice; theology and economics; theology and borders; theology and reproductive justice; theology and migration.

[<https://www.publictheologyireland.com/events/lent2021>]

Live Lent - You can access daily reflections, readings, actions and prayers on the C of E's brand new app. Download now at cofe.io/LiveLent.

Easter resources for young people and families - Connor Diocesan Youth Officer Christina Baillie has created a new Easter resource for leaders and clergy with a few ideas for young people and their parish. The post Easter resources for young...

[https://connor.anglican.org/2021/02/15/easter-resources-for-young-people-and-families/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter]

Interested in running a Saints Alive! course online?

There is a free online conference on Monday 22 February. You'll get the chance to meet the authors and hear some advice from those already running Saints Alive!

Book your place now — <http://ow.ly/rBsO50DwO3P>

World Council of Churches (WCC) - Publication “Love and Witness - Proclaiming the Peace of the Lord Jesus Christ in a Religiously Plural World”. “Love and Witness,” intends to flesh out more fully the insights of Come and See

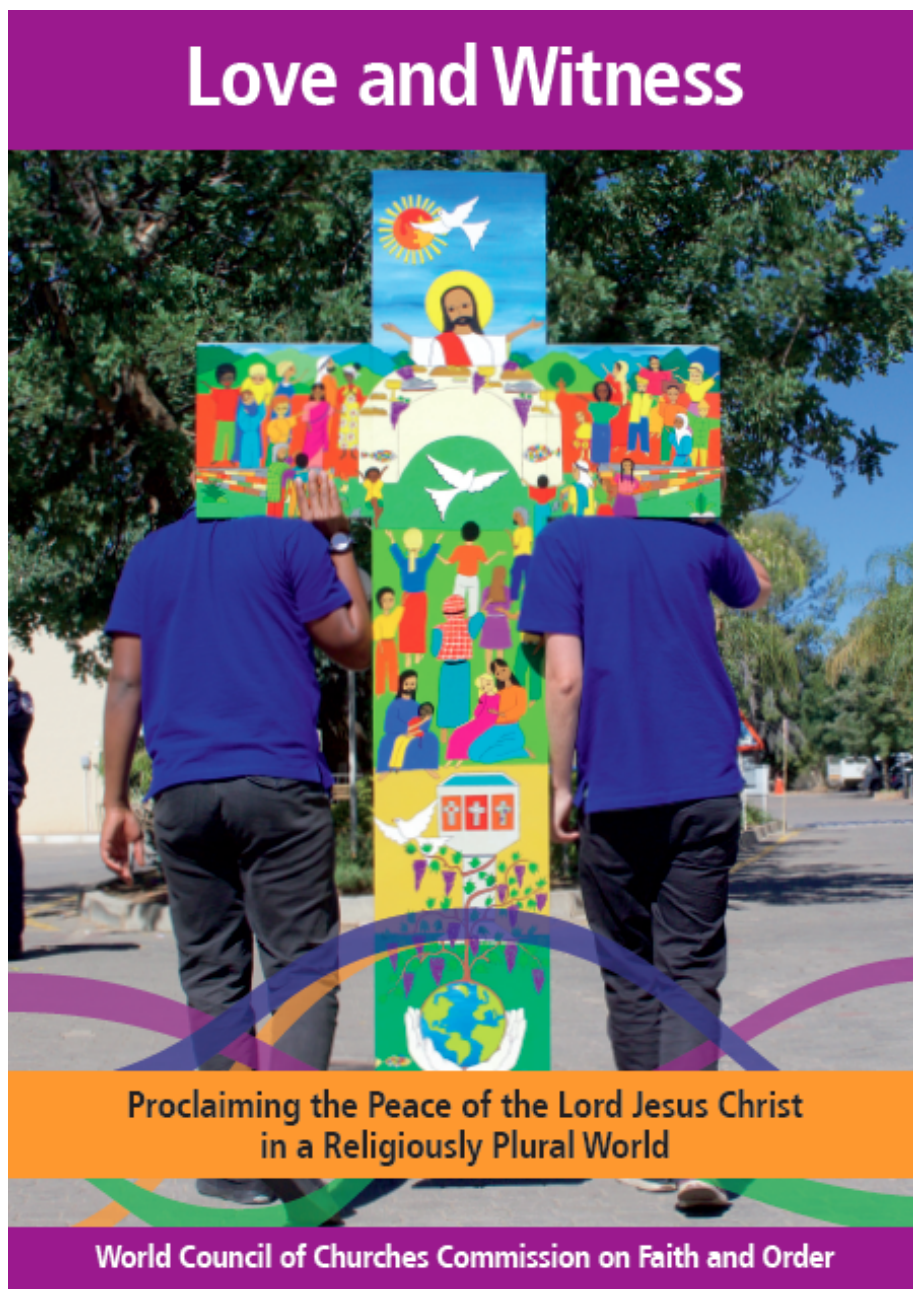
February 16, 2021

with regard to peace and religious plurality. It seeks to engage with the insights of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and others to ask what our many traditions can say together as we journey towards visible unity about the encounter with other religions that will necessarily be a part of the Church's pilgrim way.

[[] <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/publications/love-and-witness>]

Lambeth Conference prayers - Daily at - [lambethconference.org/prayers]

The Corrymeela Community Podcast — this first season explores Irishness & Britishness in 2021 — the centenary of the partition of Ireland, & 1st year of Brexit. Pres. Mary churchnewsireland@gmail.org



February 16, 2021

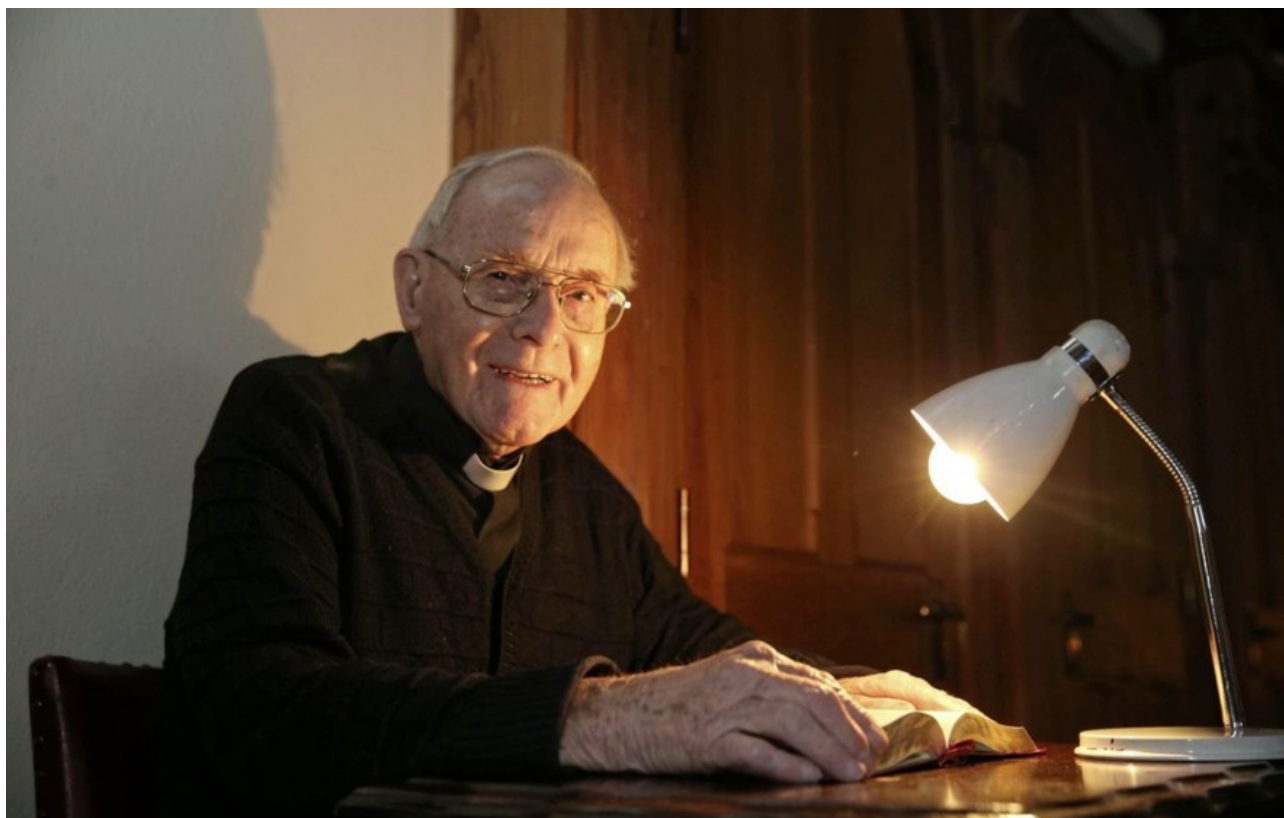
McAleese is the first guest. Followed by poets and scholars and political analysts and thinkers and all round fascinating people. Trailer is out now. Subscribe on Spotify or Apple Podcasts or wherever you get podcasts.

The issue of Climate Change - Young people want their church leaders to listen, learn alongside them and act with integrity on the issue of #ClimateChange. How can the church respond faithfully? Learn more in the new research report by Tear Fund and Youthscape
<http://bit.ly/2YVxSD8>

UCC Refugee week 2021 - Webinar, Building Bridges, Building Agency, on Feb 25th. including Dr Naomi Masheti of Cork Migrant centre and Dina Vyapuri from Purplunicorn. Refugee Week 2021 will take place from the 22nd to the 27th February 2021.
[[<https://www.ucc.ie/en/edi/universityofsanctuary/events/rw/rw2021/>]]

Training for those working with children and families: Down & Dromore YC is hosting a Zoom training evening to take you through some of the best resources for Lent and Easter. Yes please! If you missed the fantastic Building Blocks evening... downanddromore.org/news/2021/02/t...

CS Lewis Institute Belfast - “Applications are now open for our Fellows Programme for 2021/22. If you are interested in a year of intense spiritual growth from June 2021 with a group of like minded Christians from many different backgrounds why not check out our promotional video and application form on our website.”



Fr Brendan McGee, who had served more than 70 years in the priesthood, passed away on Monday of last week at Nazareth Care Village in Belfast at the age of 96. Picture by Hugh Russell

Fr Brendan McGee (96) will be remembered as ‘astonishing human being’

A priest who has died aged 96 will be remembered as “an astonishing human being”.

Fr Brendan McGee, who much of the last two decades assisting at St Patrick’s Church in Belfast city centre, died peacefully at Nazareth Care Village on Tuesday.

February 16, 2021

Originally from Trillick in Co Tyrone, Fr McGee's family moved to Hollywood in Co Down where his father owned and ran The Ruby Bar.

He was ordained in 1950 and his first postings were St Anne's in Dunmurry and St Agnes' in Anderstonstown.

From there he went to nearby St Michael's before moving to Greencastle in 1976 and St Luke's in Twinbrook a decade later.

In 1990 he became a canon and two years later was appointed to serve in Portaferry in Co Down.

In 2000 Fr McGee retired and became an assistant curate at St Patrick's on Belfast's Donegall Street.

He was made a Dean of the Diocesan Chapter and celebrated his last Mass at St Patrick's in November 2019 before moving into Nazareth Care Village.

In 2016, on the 75th anniversary of the German 'Blitz' of Belfast, Fr McGee recalled in The Irish News how he had looked out of his bedroom window in Hollywood to see the city on fire.

Aged 16 at the time, he told how his mother said the Rosary as he and his sisters took cover under their kitchen table as bombers flew up Belfast Lough.

When he travelled to Belfast for school at St Malachy's College the next day, he found buildings destroyed and firefighters "with a terrible look of exhaustion on their faces".

February 16, 2021

Fr Eugene O'Neill, administrator of St Patrick's, said Fr McGee had "a huge impact on people".

"He was an institution in the diocese and in each of the parishes he served," he said.

"He had a photographic memory and a sharp intellect, which he continued to the end.

"He never forgot anyone he married or buried or worked with. It was incredible."

Fr McGee, who rode a motorcycle for the first 10 years of his ministry, will be cremated and his ashes placed in St Joseph's Columbarium in St Patrick's Church.

Fr O'Neill said he purchased the first niche when the columbarium was completed in 2012 and his remains will be placed in vault 1A.

"This man was as close to saint as I ever met," he said.

"He had an immense power of prayer. An astonishing human being."

Posting on Facebook, Corpus Christi Parish in west Belfast also described Fr McGee as "an exemplary priest" who would be remembered with "immense gratitude, love and affection".

"He was a wise and holy man and entirely fearless. His exploits are the stuff of legends. He would confront men with

February 16, 2021

guns whether they were British soldiers or members of the IRA or UDA. He had the heart of a lion.

“He was, above all, a devoted pastor to the People of God and a faithful priest of Jesus Christ.”

Pointers for prayer

Almighty Father,
whose Son was revealed in majesty
before he suffered death upon the cross:
give us grace to perceive his glory,
that we may be strengthened to suffer with him
and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Today we pray for protesters in Russia. After opposition politician Alexei Navalny was arrested last week, widespread pro-democracy protest has broken out nationally, with many peaceful protesters arrested. We pray for the preservation of the right to protest.

Pray for all teachers and parents involved with students or their children. We ask for stamina and creativity as they seek to educate in less than ideal circumstances.

It has been announced that on Ascension Day - 13 May 2021, Bishop Hosam Naoum will be installed as Bishop of the Diocese of Jerusalem, bearing the title Archbishop. Please pray for Bishop Naoum, his family and the Diocese.

Pray that the right person will be appointed to lead Church Army in the next chapter. Pray for wisdom for the Board members as they meet to decide who will be appointed.

We think today of families who are struggling to cope with the ongoing restrictions to normal life, especially those who live in small homes with no outside space. We pray for an abundance of tolerance to help ease their less than ideal circumstances.

Today we give thanks for young climate activists. A UN survey shows that demand for green business and jobs is particularly high among young people, who have been a driving force behind getting the issue onto the political agenda.

We remember with thanks the numerous Mothers' Union members who, over the years, have used their God-given gifts to change the world. We pray that, in our day, we'll also be willing to use our gifts to help transform lives and communities

We pray today for the church across the world, especially in places where they are experiencing hardship and persecution. We stand together with our sisters and brothers and pray for God to bring relief from their circumstances.

Lord Jesus, you prayed that we would all be united together so the world would believe and experience your love. Help us to put aside that which keeps us apart and work together to share your love through our actions and our lives.

February 16, 2021

Almighty God,
you have created the heavens and the earth
and made us in your own image:
teach us to discern your hand in all your works
and your likeness in all your children;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who with you and the Holy Spirit reigns supreme over all
things,
now and for ever. Amen

Speaking to the Soul

Mary responded, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me.”

Luke 1:46-49 NLT

What an incredible moment this was for Mary! How could anyone put into words the overwhelming joy and privilege of being called to be the mother of the Saviour of the World? It is hardly surprising that she, as a young Jewish girl, turns to familiar words from the Scriptures. She would have been brought up with the wonderful story of Hannah, Samuel’s mother, and would have been familiar with her prayer when she learnt that she was going to give birth.

There are many moments in our lives as Christians when we simply don’t have the words to describe how grateful we are to God. Like Mary, we often turn to other people’s words to describe how we are feeling. I thank God for many songs and hymns which have been precious to me over the years,

February 16, 2021

and some of them are firmly associated with a particular experience. Once I had a long and fiercely hot journey across Romania. I was travelling with a disabled friend of mine and as we passed through Transylvania our van broke down. My companions and I were not great technicians but to our amazement we managed to fix it. As we travelled into Oradea, our destination, we instinctively broke out into song. We sang “Great is thy faithfulness” and we really meant it! We could have expressed everything we wanted to say in a prayer but it felt so much more complete to join together in singing a hymn with which we were all familiar and which also bound us together with God’s people who had used the hymn to express their worship for so many years.

God loves it when we worship him, whether we use our words or borrow them from others. Mary’s song may have been based on familiar words from the Old Testament scriptures but there is no doubting that they were words from her heart.

QUESTION

What song or hymn is particularly important to you?

PRAYER

Thank you Lord for Mary’s prayer and for the way in which it encourages me to praise you for your greatness. Amen.

