

Image of the day - Rochester Cathedral



Casual conversation leads to Virginia Tree Festival

At the end of November, the Ven Canon Craig McCauley, Rector of the Virginia Church of Ireland Group of Parishes in Co. Cavan and Archdeacon of Kilmore Diocese, was having a conversation with his daughter Laura, a second year Business Studies student in Dublin City University.

They were reflecting on how hard the year had been and how much she as a student had lost out on and how much as communities we had missed in 2020 and will miss at Christmas. They both agreed it would be lovely to do



something to bring the church community and wider community together in a safe way.

Laura casually remarked to her dad that he had been thinking about doing a Christmas Tree festival in the Church of Ireland grounds in Virginia for a while now and maybe this year was the year to do it. Encouraged by Laura and his wife Vida, Craig sounded out some parishioners and members of the wider community who were cautious but enthusiastic about the idea.

Within 10 days, 52 Christmas trees were delivered to the Rectory and a week later the trees were up in the church grounds. Craig reached out to local businesses, organisations, sporting groups and church groups with the idea and invited them to sponsor and decorate individual trees along the grounds which became known as the 'Avenue of Light'.



Laura and Craig

The response was instant and humbling, said Laura and Craig, within a week all 52 trees were sponsored and within another week they were creatively decorated and ready to be lit. So great was the response nearly €6,000 was raised for 3 local charities – St. Vincent de Paul, Willow's Cafe Food Hampers and Virginia Cancer Care.

At the top of the church grounds were three focal points. A 'Tree of Remembrance' filled with names on wooden discs made by Craig's son Matthew of those who have died and who are missed at Christmas, and a 'Not Home for Christmas Tree' again filled with names of those who we aren't able to see at Christmas who can't travel home, are shielding, are in nursing homes or in hospital.

At the heart of the Avenue of Light was a life size crib put there by the local scouts with a simple sign of hope under

January 5, 2020

the crib which simply says: 'The Word (Jesus) became flesh and dwelt among us.'

Over the lead-up to Christmas and during the Christmas period many, many people have come and visited the 'Avenue of Light' in a safe manner. It has been the talk of the town, something positive to focus on and shows how a casual conversation can lead to something special amidst a difficult and challenging year for all.

Archbishop endorses Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2021

The Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Revd John McDowell, has endorsed and encouraged the use of resources for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, this month.

Archbishop McDowell writes:

There could hardly be more challenging circumstances in which to plan for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity on 18–25 January. "Getting together" in local settings was in itself a witness to the underlying communion we share by virtue of our baptism and faith in the Crucified and Risen Lord. In large parts of the island of Ireland probably that will be impossible this year. In other parts, it will be very limited.

However, clergy and lay people have shown themselves to be imaginative in keeping the worshipping life of the Church alive in general and I trust that new ways will be developed to give some concrete expression to Our Lord's desire that "...they may all be one".



The Archbishop of Armagh, the Most Revd John McDowell

The resource material in this unusual year has been prepared by a very singular group, the Grandchamp Community based in the French speaking part of Switzerland. It is a monastic community of women, begun by members of the Reformed tradition, but now fully ecumenical, sitting outside the formal structures, of any tradition, but with strong links to the Taizé Community.

It began when a group of Reformed women rediscovered the practice of silence in gathering around the Word of God. The material they have produced centres on a well-known passage from St John's Gospel, "Abide in me".

I pray that their spirit of silence in the presence of the Word may inspire you as you think about the opportunities for ecumenical witness and worship in the period of silence we are passing through.

Resources available at -

[<https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/worship-and-background-material-for-the-week-of-prayer-for-christian-unity-2021>]

MPs call for IRA victims to get share of Gaddafi assets

Ministers have been accused of suppressing an official government report that could trigger millions of pounds of compensation for IRA victims, Christopher Hope, Chief political correspondent writes in the Sunday Telegraph.

A cross-party group of MPs is demanding the immediate publication of a report into billions of pounds of cash which was hoarded in the UK by the former Libyan dictator Colonel Muammar Gaddafi.

Victims of IRA bombs in the 1980s and 1990s which used Semtex supplied to the terrorist group by Col Gaddafi want some of the proceeds given to them in compensation.

It was reported in 2019 that the UK government had collected £17 million in tax on £12 billion-worth of frozen Libyan assets held in this country.

The former Charity Commission chairman William Shawcross was appointed as the Foreign Secretary's special representative on the issue in March 2019 and asked to advise on how much compensation should be sought and how the UK Government can support efforts to obtain redress from Tripoli.

However, his report is yet to be published despite being submitted to ministers months ago.

Last May, Foreign Office minister James Cleverly told MPs: “Mr Shawcross has now submitted his report. Ministers will consider the report in detail once the current need to focus on the Covid-19 crisis has abated.”

However, in August, Baroness Sugg, at the time a Foreign Office minister, said the report may not be published in full, telling peers that “Government ministers will consider the report in detail in due course, including whether to publish any elements of it”.

In a letter to The Sunday Telegraph this week, the group of MPs led by DUP MP Ian Paisley, demanded the report’s



January 5, 2020

immediate publication. They said: “Mr Shawcross’s completed report has been with the government for many months and nothing has come of it. The minister responsible for it will not publish it and the contents remain secret. This is not good enough.

“Victims all across the UK who suffered at the hands of the IRA from weapons and explosives the IRA received from Gaddafi remain without justice and have been denied access to the recommendations made by William Shawcross. What is the Government hiding?

“What has Shawcross proposed for the victims? Has the government any intention of making good on promises made that victims of Libyan sponsored terror will receive justice before it’s too late. Today, we call on the government



January 5, 2020

to publish the Shawcross report without further delay and help bring this matter of compensation to a conclusion.”

A Foreign Commonwealth & Development Office spokesman said: “Ministers are carefully considering the complex issues captured in Mr Shawcross’ internal report, giving due respect to the victims.” Mr Shawcross confirmed he had submitted the report to the Foreign Secretary last March but declined to comment further.

Primate due credit for brave criticism of nationalist leaders

Archbishop’s words should act as a catalyst to heal divisions - Alf McCreay in the Belfast Telegraph

Archbishop Eamon Martin, the Irish Catholic Primate, deserves great credit for his recent courageous message criticising nationalist and republican politicians for failing to engage with the commemoration of the centenary of Northern Ireland in 2021.

Writing about the centenary in the Irish Catholic newspaper he stated: “For unionists and indeed loyalist communities in Northern Ireland it represents for them a significant moment in the establishment of the Northern Ireland state.

“I would like to see the 2021 centenary as an opportunity for greater mutual understanding, for opportunities to build further reconciliation and peace”.

January 5, 2020

He added: “I am somewhat disappointed that many of our nationalist and republican political leaders have dismissed the centenary of 2021 altogether because for me I think it's really important to seize it as a moment to reflect on where we've come from.”

While clearly identifying himself as a nationalist, he went on to state: “If we could accept that people on this island approach their belonging from very different perspectives — that was the key to the Good Friday Agreement; that we would recognise legitimate aspirations on the island, and that to me is something that we're better not to run away from, but to face.”

In my opinion Archbishop Martin's statement is one of the most important I have read from any Irish Church leader in the two decades during which I have reported for this newspaper on religious matters.

The late Cardinal Cahal Daly was a most charming man who worked tirelessly with the former Church of Ireland Primate Archbishop Robin Eames to build bridges during their shared times of office. However he was infinitely layered, and almost Jesuitical, in his public statements, apart from those in which he relentlessly criticized the Provisional IRA.

Cardinal Sean Brady is also a most charming man who was starting to make significant speeches about the moral perils of the Celtic Tiger until he was overtaken by events which were partly beyond his control.



He had a warm regard for the Protestant community, and I once told him personally that he often wrote and spoke like a Protestant evangelical from east Belfast — a point which amused him greatly.

However he was not in office long enough to take a significant position on constitutional matters of the kind which Archbishop Martin has just made.

He too is a charming, warm-hearted man with a sense of humour, as I discovered in an in-depth interview with him for this newspaper some time ago. His criticism of national and republican political leaders was tactfully worded.

The days when a Catholic leader can criticize people publicly with “a belt of the crozier” have gone, but there is no mistaking his clear disappointment with his fellow nationalists, and republicans; and when a Primate speaks in this way about politicians he is also sending a message to the faithful Catholics in (and often out of) the pew.



There is no doubt that the unionists made mistake after mistake since the establishment of Northern Ireland. There was indefensible gerrymandering, and discrimination in housing and employment, and the current DUP has totally lost its way since the politically astute Peter

Robinson resigned some years ago and sought refuge — though not entirely — in his retirement.

However the sectarianism was not only one-sided. I recall as a young boy in nationalist Newry fearfully watching local people hurling chairs onto the stage of the Town Hall when the National Anthem was being played at the end of a concert staged by the-then forerunner of the Arts Council.

Of course it is difficult for nationalists and republicans to swallow hard and overlook the past, but as Archbishop Martin has pointed out: “If there is ever to be greater mutual

January 5, 2020

understanding and living together on the island of Ireland, then we need to be able to face difficult moments and difficult episodes from our history and we need to be able to face this openly.” As a practicing Protestant (and a proud holder of British and Irish passports) I too am very disappointed by the current attitude of the SDLP, for which I have great respect. I wonder if John Hume would have taken the same line in his heyday.

Sadly, I am not surprised by the reaction of Sinn Fein which stated: “The centenary of partition is nothing to celebrate for Irish republicans, nationalists and democrats. Partition has been to the detriment of citizens across this island, and continues to restrict our social and economic potential.” Unfortunately, the leadership of Sinn Fein knows no better and it will take decades for the party to begin to understand the true meaning and challenges of democracy. Meanwhile it is important to acknowledge the importance of Archbishop Martin's solo run in speaking out to his flock in the North, and also being aware that his words will be read carefully by policy-makers and very many others in the Republic.



January 5, 2020

We sometimes forget that not only the Catholic Church but also the Presbyterian, Methodist and Church of Ireland congregations belong to all-island Churches.

The current Moderator the Rt Reverend David Bruce has spent a significant part of his career working with churches and organisations in the Republic, and the Methodist President-elect the Reverend Dr Sahr Yambasu, originally from Sierra Leone, is based in the Irish Republic where he has served widely in different parishes.

Perhaps it is time for the Irish Churches, north and south, to engage further in this important debate about the long-term peaceful relationships among people within and across both jurisdictions.

In the past the Churches were accused, not entirely unfairly, of being part of the problem, but 2021 provides a further opportunity to prove that they can be part of the solution. What better challenge for the Churches than to promote honest engagement, understanding and hope for the future...

Alf McCreary is the Belfast Telegraph's Religion Correspondent Belfast Telegraph, 04, January, 2021

Christian Aid transformer named in New Year's Honours list

Christian Aid's former head of humanitarian Nick Guttman has been awarded an OBE in the New Year's Honours list for services to humanitarian crises.

Nick, 64, had worked for Christian Aid since 2001 before retiring from the organisation earlier this year.

In his time at the international development

agency, he transformed Christian Aid's humanitarian relief work and contributed to the whole humanitarian sector shifting its approach towards more locally-based and locally-accountable humanitarian actions.

During his time, Nick led humanitarian responses for Christian Aid in Afghanistan, Iraq and Darfur, as well as in the Pakistan earthquake, cyclone Nargis in Myanmar, the Indian Ocean tsunami, the Haiti earthquake, the Syrian displacement crisis, the Nepal earthquake and the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, along with working on conflict and food shortages in the East and Horn of Africa and the DRC, and conflict in Borno State, Nigeria.

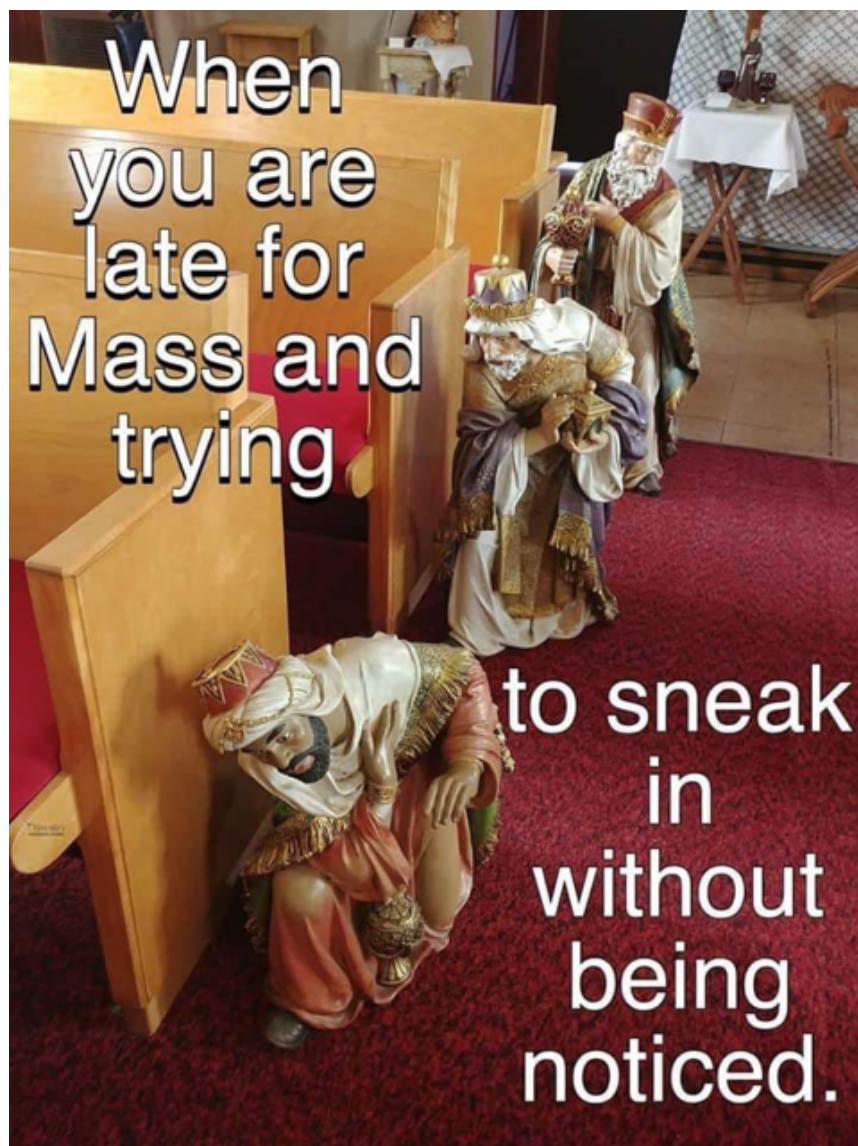
Most recently, he led on the response to the Covid-19 pandemic in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and the Middle East, including setting up Christian Aid staff in country programmes to enable local organisations to



minimise the spread of the virus and to mitigate wider effects on lives and livelihoods.

Robin Greenwood, international programmes director at Christian Aid, said: “We are delighted that Nick’s commitment and service to the humanitarian sector has been recognised. He has been a powerful advocate in the sector for putting accountability to affected communities and their participation in decision-making at the centre of relief agencies’ response.

“Throughout Nick has embedded the principle of ‘building back better’ with a bias to improving the situations of those



people who are most vulnerable because of their gender, ethnicity or social exclusion, in order that they are better prepared to meet future crises.

“Nick’s work, the standards that he has set and the practices that he has driven forward mean that thousands of lives have been saved and hundreds of thousands of

January 5, 2020

people have preserved or restarted their livelihood. The sort of disasters that in the 1990s killed tens of thousands of people now claim dozens of lives. This honour is richly deserved.”

Speaking about his honour, Nick said: “I was really shocked to see my name there! It’s a tremendous honour. I could never have achieved it without all the amazing people at Christian Aid and across the globe who shared the vision of relieving the suffering of those in greatest need in a way that empowered individuals and communities to take control of their own lives and build a better future for themselves, their families and communities. In this uncertain world, now more than ever before we have to do what we can to relieve suffering wherever it occurs, listening to those affected, responding to their needs and working together for a better world.”

Pointers for prayer

As we begin a new year that none of us would have imagined this time last January, we pray for God to give a sense of purpose and faith that he has good plans for us, however the year unfolds.

Uganda is preparing for general, presidential and parliamentary elections this Thursday. Pray for the elections to take place peacefully and safely in light of the continued threat of the coronavirus.

Today we pray for the UK’s new financial commitments in 2021. The recent Spending Review included the aid budget



being slashed to just 0.5% of GNI and didn't commit to a permanent £20 uplift in Universal Credit.

Today we pray for people who will be homeless in 2021. As we look towards the new year, people experiencing homelessness will once again be faced with a new set of distinct challenges.

Today we pray for COP26. The global climate conference, rescheduled from 2020, will be taking place in Glasgow in 2021. We pray for ambition and action from world leaders on climate change, and pray that those already affected by climate chaos would be kept safe.

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph & Mary, and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas and the blessing of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit be with you. Amen

Speaking to the soul

That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them.

Luke 2:8-9 NLT

Of all the many surprises in the Christmas story this surely is one of the greatest. We have long since got used to the fact that the birth of Jesus was announced to shepherds, but they were surely the last people who you would have expected to hear about it. They were always last to hear the news. Their work forced them to live away from their communities. But more than that, shepherds were smelly and ritually unclean because of their work. How amazing that God gave them the front seats in the Christmas story!

If we had been given the responsibility of compiling an appropriate guest list to welcome the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, I would guess that shepherds might well have not made an appearance. We would certainly have included the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. If Jesus was their Messiah surely it would be crucial for them to be there? And then we would have thought about him meeting faithful worshippers who had been praying for this moment for years. We could have come up with a long list quite easily but the idea of including some smelly, ritually unclean shepherds from the fields might well not have occurred to us.

But it did occur to God, and during Jesus' ministry he consistently reached out to people who lived on the margins

January 5, 2020

of society or beyond. The tax collectors, the prostitutes, people suffering from leprosy, the children – they were all really welcome because the Kingdom that Jesus came to bring was open to everyone.

It is tragically true that every society pushes some people to the margins. In our own day it is often determined by ethnicity, colour, age, wealth and physical fitness. That means that as we follow Jesus we need to keep a special eye on those who might get overlooked – because God will never overlook them, and he calls on us to embrace them with his love.

QUESTION

Who are the equivalents of the shepherds in our own society?

PRAYER

Thank you Lord that your love reaches out to all. Help us to pass on your love to those who are overlooked by society. Amen.



