

Northern Ireland is "symbol of hope" for the world, says Archbishop on historic St Patrick's Day visit.

Archbishop Justin Welby at Down Cathedral, Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, 17 March 2015.

The Archbishop of Canterbury offered a message of hope and reconciliation to the people of Northern Ireland yesterday as he took part in St Patrick's Day celebrations.

Archbishop Justin Welby was visiting County Down to make the traditional pilgrimage to the burial place of St Patrick in Downpatrick, County Down - the first time an Archbishop of Canterbury has done so in 50 years.

Highlights of the Archbishop's visit included preaching on reconciliation at Down Cathedral, and meeting with young people from across the Protestant-Catholic divide who are involved in peace work.

He was visiting County Down as a guest of Bishop of Down and Dromore Harold Miller.

Archbishop Justin Welby leads prayers at St Patrick's grave, Downpatrick, Northern Ireland, 17 March 2015.

The Archbishop preached on the theme of reconciliation at Down Cathedral at a festive service attended by the primate of the Church of Ireland, Archbishop of Armagh Richard Clarke, as well as MP Margaret Ritchie, Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly Mitchel McLaughlin, and Justice Minister and Alliance party leader David Ford.

In his sermon he said: "The world needs the witness of those who have made the journey from enemy to friend, who are no longer strangers and aliens, who are being built together into an altogether different community in the household of God. And if there is any community who knows this, not simply in heads but in hearts, it is here in Northern Ireland.

"There remain huge challenges, because reconciliation is a fragile flower that always finds itself in the cold climate of the human heart, and can only be nurtured by the warmth of love, of fellowship, of mutuality, of the Spirit of God from whom it comes.

"Despite those challenges you have embarked with enormous courage on the long road to reconciliation and you are the symbol of hope for so many around the world. Don't give up. Make it work. It is a gift of God to you for the world. It is held in your hands as a treasure. It is something that comes from the peace of God."

After the service the Archbishop laid a wreath on St Patrick's grave before joining a parade through Downpatrick attended by an estimated 30,000 people.

The Archbishop made the two-mile pilgrimage walk to Down Cathedral from Saul, site of one of St Patrick's first churches, where this morning he presided at a service of Holy Communion.

Yesterday morning the Archbishop joined the World Methodist Vice-President, Gillian Kingston, at Downpatrick Methodist Church to launch a new cooperation plan for the Anglican and Methodist Churches.Â

Last night he spoke to some 300 young people involved in peace work, at an event in Belfast to encourage those aged 16-30 with a faith perspective to make their voices heard.

Before departing this morning, the Archbishop had breakfast with 20-30 year olds working in politics, business, Church, media and academia. The event aims to inspire young leaders to be peacemakers in their various spheres of influence, across the Protestant-Catholic divide, but also peacemakers with respect to conflict with refugees, with other faiths and in other areas of society and civic life.

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