

Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs

3 June 2019

Address by the Rt Rev Dr Charles McMullen, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

In the journey of life we are deeply indebted to those who have believed in us and helped us on our way. We look back with fondness and gratitude to a family member or friend; teacher or professor who inspired and encouraged us perhaps in ways they do not even realise or appreciate. This year, when I was standing in the pulpit of my home congregation of Trinity, Omagh, I could picture my parents sitting in their pew and saw the faces of ever patient Sunday School teachers who enabled Jesus Christ to become totally personal and alive to me.

The Apostle Paul was entirely devoted to his young protégé Timothy, a naturally reticent and diffident follower of Jesus Christ. The Gospel is totally redemptive and completely restorative – accepting us as we are in Jesus Christ and giving us the potential, as we trust in him, to become everything that he intends us to be. And so Paul comes alongside his young friend and speaks these wonderful words of promise and hope: “For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1:7).

“Timothy, as you trust in the Lord, he will enable you to overcome your natural fears.” I can imagine God by the truth of his word and the power of his Spirit beginning to shape Timothy’s character, turning his weaknesses into opportunities. I can anticipate the transformation that will have taken place by the end of Timothy’s life: perfect love that has cast out all fear; the formation of a sensitive, beautiful and gentle spirit; the development of a listening ear and the ability to use the right words to encourage others.

I can now see a warm, pastoral heart full of wisdom and discernment. Timothy has become relaxed, confident and assured in his Lord as he reaches out to others. That's what Paul means as he describes God giving us a spirit of self-discipline or the "sanity of saintliness" – prevailing love, joy deeper than life's circumstances and peace that passes all understanding.

God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power? Last August Barbara and I had the privilege of spending time with two of our Presbyterian global mission workers in the Middle East, who have become dear friends. While there, I had to preach four times in seminaries and churches, and always had excellent translators. The only time that an interpreter was completely stumped was by my Northern Irish pronunciation of the word 'power'.

Even though he could not understand me at that precise moment, there was more than ample evidence of the presence and power of God at work in that numerically small congregation. Its members were showing unconditional love and living sacrificially, providing food and accommodation for many refugees, as well as having set up a school to educate their children.

We visited other refugees who were being looked after by the Jordan Bible Society and were deeply moved by their traumatic stories of flight and the physical violence they had endured. As I prayed with them and read God's Word, I was suddenly aware of my own inadequacy and yet I experienced the wonderful reality of God's promises reaching into the depths of their particular experiences, and bringing such a sense of peace, comfort and hope.

The power of God is demonstrated as we see his hand at work often in mysterious ways. We visited the Greek Evangelical Church near Thessaloniki and received such an outstanding welcome and hospitality. We found ourselves in a Church that had been founded almost one hundred years ago by Greeks fleeing from Asia Minor, who received help along the way from the citizens of Aleppo. Now all these years later that the people of Aleppo have arrived on their doorstep as refugees, such is the community memory of gratitude passed down through the generations that the Greek Church is providing for them food, clothes, accommodation and rehabilitation.

Paul writes elsewhere that Christ is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us. That same resurrection power, which moved the stone from the tomb and brought Jesus Christ gloriously back to life, is made available to all who believe.

Jesus reaches into the coldest, darkest tombs of human existence and brings the warmth of his loving kindness and the light of his beautiful presence. He still moves the stones of brokenness and heartache and brings healing and renewal. His power turns weak, ineffective people into strong, effective and radiant people. How true it is that we can be taken up with so many little and marginal things in church life that we miss this central power!

That power is made available to us in our weakness, as if we could ever begin to rely on our own strength. These are times of unprecedented persecution of Christians throughout the world and this resurrection power sustains countless millions of our brothers and sisters who are bowed, but not broken. And for us in the western world, as we confront the spirit of the age, we too are able to rely on the promises of Almighty God.

The soundbites that define our age often revolve around tolerance, inclusion and equality. There is much here that I am sure is commendable, but sometimes as we scratch a little deeper below the surface, for all our talk of tolerance in a pluralistic society, the demand seems to be that we all adopt the characteristics and beliefs of the prevailing social norm, or otherwise risk being branded phobic or bigoted. Or again, issues can arise as society seeks to include and equally affirm every perspective with no longer any overall sense of right or wrong.

Tim Keller comments succinctly: “Any effort to practice absolute inclusion always leads to new forms of exclusion. You may say, for example, ‘There are no good people and bad people,’ but now those who think there *are* good and bad people are the bad people. Supposedly rejecting all ‘binaries’ immediately creates new ones.”

I have heard all of this described as cultural Marxism or the nationalisation of ideas that removes absolute standards and reduces humanity to the lowest common denominator. There is nothing new here, because the Apostle Paul reminds us: “We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” The choice is stark. Either as followers of Jesus Christ we assimilate ourselves to the spirit of the age and find ourselves orphans in the next, or we develop a strong apologetic that will counter the dogmas of this present age.

We look at contemporary society in its selfish individualism and indulgent consumerism, moral confusion and fractured politics where there are underlying questions of confidence and trust. Surely we can make a difference to such vacuousness, as followers of Jesus Christ. Either we ride the latest wave of so-called progressive populism generated by social media only to find ourselves cast adrift, or we stand on the unchanging rock of Jesus Christ. I believe no society can function properly without the Christian distinctives with which Paul addresses Timothy: grace, mercy and peace. We can also add forgiveness, peace and the reconciling power of the cross itself.

I believe with all my heart that the convincing proof of this will not be the force of our arguments but the community that we build together in the Church of Jesus Christ. Others will not care how much we know until they know how much we care. Paul writes that we have been given a spirit of love. Love is the very heartbeat of New Testament spirituality. We are commanded: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind”; and, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’”

Let me draw a picture of Christian love in this way. Barbara and I have been travelling extensively throughout Ireland and one day I suddenly discovered the beauty of the County Monaghan countryside – clouds scudding across the rapidly changing skies; the flowing rivers and full lakes; the undulating landscape of hills and drumlins; the playful tapestry of green fields and hedges; daffodils dancing in the breeze; and the verdant green of trees bursting joyfully into spring life. I am staring at all of this with childlike wonder and suddenly I look at Barbara who is studying the map, trying to work out our evening destination. I said, “Look at what you’re missing! Look!” She now replies without looking up from the map, “I want to know where we are.”

It's about the map, or the Word of God coming gloriously alive, so that we find ourselves lost in the worship of the risen Christ – in wonder, love and praise. We find a real desire for God's Word, wanting to learn, grow and go deeper in discipleship. There is genuine community where there is unbelievable generosity of spirit and selfless devotion to one another. It's a place where we rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. Also here now in this revived Church, where we are emptied of all self and filled only with Christ, we use our God-given gifts and earthly treasure sacrificially in the service of others. And as we reach out to others, they are attracted by what they see.

As I draw to a close, the Bible, which we treasure as a denomination as the unchanging Word of God, is full of promises. This is how Paul addresses Timothy: "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, according to the promise of life that is in Christ Jesus". That promise of life in all its fullness for evermore is offered and extended to each and every one of us.

As a little boy growing up in this denomination to which I owe so much and love deeply, I placed my trust in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I have been taken on an adventure of a lifetime which I would not have missed for the entire world. And it's the same for all who come to him.

As I began my year in office, I was blessed by the gift of a Moderator's Box full of envelopes containing promises which had been made for me by a 12 year old member of my congregation, Nathan McAleer. As the year draws to an end, each promise has been safely opened and believed:

On the day you leave West Church – "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13).

On the opening night of the General Assembly as you speak for the first time as Moderator– "Do not be anxious about anything" (Philippians 4:6-7).

On a day when you feel down – "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

On a day when you feel you have an important thing to say, but don't know how it will be received – "God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7).

And how are these promises to come gloriously to life? Yes, as we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. But note what Paul also writes to Timothy: “For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands.” Like so many others, I was deeply saddened to see Notre Dame on fire just a few weeks ago. I was captivated, however, by two observations: to see so many watching from the banks of the Seine and then there was the picture of the burnished cross standing over the ruins. In other words, the drawing power of the Church fully alive which is the burning, blazing love of the Lord Jesus Christ. That God would fan the flame in my life, the life of our congregations, the Church of Jesus Christ throughout Ireland, our denomination and this General Assembly - *Ardens sed Virens*.

As I have spoken for the Presbyterian Church this year, let me conclude briefly by speaking to her. First of all, the need for courage and confidence. We are not an isolationist and separatist Church – we never have been or will be - but confident of who we are in Christ we reach out to others. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power.

Secondly, compassion and community. That as followers of Jesus Christ we would be full of his love and truth as we build genuine community together. For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of love! Or, as somebody once put it exactly a year ago on this platform: “Building Relationships – Christ’s love compels us!”

Ends.

Check against delivery.