

**Strictly embargoed 20:00hrs**

**Wednesday, 21 June 2023**

**Address by the Rt Rev Dr Sam Mawhinney, following his election as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland for 2023/2024, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.**

## **Confident in Christ**

*46 “Why do you call me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and do not do what I say? 47 As for everyone who comes to me and hears my words and puts them into practice, I will show you what they are like. 48 They are like a man building a house, who dug down deep and laid the foundation on rock. When a flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it, because it was well built. 49 But the one who hears my words and does not put them into practice is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. The moment the torrent struck that house, it collapsed and its destruction was complete.” Luke 6:46-49.*

### **The rock in Ballycastle**

I was born in Ballycastle County Antrim and love the place for many good reasons. When I think of a rock, I think of the basalt rock on the beach there and it gives me a picture that I often think about, of permanence and stability, one that hasn't changed in my lifetime. Jesus tells us that the true Christian, is like one who builds on “the rock”, a metaphor of Jesus and His word. A Jesus who is unchanging, solid and stable like the rock on Ballycastle beach. The picture Jesus paints is one of contrast, to build upon Jesus and his word is like building upon rock, or if Jesus is rejected and ignored then your life is built upon sand. The house may look similar, but when the storms come, and your life is tested, it is the foundation that counts.

### **The storm**

In the picture Jesus paints, “the flood came, and the torrent struck”, a crisis, and a testing. We live in post Christian Europe and the culture and society is hostile to the church of Jesus Christ.

The speed of the change has been breath taking and for those of us who live in the Republic of Ireland in 2015 a majority of people in the State affirmed that marriage would be between two people irrespective of the sex of each partner. Then abortion was legalised through the repeal of the Eight amendment in May 2018. Two of the primary teachings of Jesus and the Church were rejected, “the flood came, and the torrent struck.” Two foundation blocks of Christian teaching for society, marriage and the sanctity of life in the womb were rocked and we felt the seismic ripples beneath our feet.

Added to that society tends be intolerant of contrary views, and when contrary views are expressed, they are assessed it seems primarily by how they make the recipient feel, rather than the merit of the argument. Contrary views are often cancelled and it is becoming harder to get a hearing for the Church in the public square. So, we live in post Christian times, the Christian message is now not seen as good news, there is hostility towards the Church, from an increasing number of quarters, these are the storms that we face.

### **Our response**

What has been our response to this storm of society’s challenge? If we keep the picture in our minds and are inside our house looking out, then we might simply criticise the weather and “say isn’t that awful”. Our first response is often to criticise, but alongside that, we can be found cowering and afraid in our house, worrying about our house. For others including a growing number of Christian leaders, and denominations, we forget our foundation and drift with the tide. Lastly, some have already given up and said “it’s not working in the house”, and they jump out into the waters and go with the flow. Our responses can be to criticise, cower, capitulate and cave as one writer helpfully listed them.

Having lived in Dublin City for the last 15 years, this is reality; it is hard to stand against the tide, to hold onto to Christ and the foundations of the word of God. The rapid change in society compounded by the global pandemic of the Coronavirus infection means that following Jesus has got a lot more difficult and there are competing and opposing views to our Christian world view.

## **Our confidence**

However, this is not a new reality. Jesus felt the same vulnerability and sadness of the loss of disciples because of the difficulty of believing in an unbelieving world. The Apostle John reports of a time in Jesus' ministry when his followers started to desert Him, "from this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him" (John 6:66).

Jesus feels it personally, and He asks his disciples, the twelve, "do you want to go away as well?" (John 6:67). Jesus' deep desire of course is that His people would not abandon him and would not build on sand, or follow the tide of the world's thinking and find themselves sadly without hope in collapse and destruction when the storms of life come, and they face death, judgement and eternity without the One who loved them and gave His life to save them and keep them for eternity.

Thankfully Simon Peter utters these brilliant words, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68). This is my call to myself and the Church of Jesus Christ and particularly to PCI. Let us be confident in Christ, let us build on the rock. Let us hold to His words in the scriptures and let us build lives and communities that will stand and thrive in the reality of our present world, without criticism, cowering, capitulation or caving in and to do that with confidence.

I had the privilege in university of sharing student accommodation with an architect and a town planner and have had a mild interest in buildings and the politics of planning ever since. Most of us enjoy walking in a neighbourhood where houses are well built, and I live in such an area in Dublin 14. Those in Dublin comment on the fact that the manse is Crampton built; built by a firm of reliable builders that have an excellent reputation for building solid houses.

Jesus comments in his story, "When the flood came the torrent struck that house, but could not shake it, because it was well built" (Luke 6:48). What does well built look like? How then can we build well?

Jesus begins His story with a searching question? “Why do you call me, Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46). The double use of the word ‘Lord’ is a claim to intimacy in relationship. When Jesus wanted Martha to learn the priority of spending time with Him, he said, “Martha, Martha!” (Luke 10:41). When Jesus cried out to his father on the cross, he said, “My God, My God” (Matthew 27:26), it was a claim to deep intimacy and relationship.

The measure of intimacy, relationship and seriousness towards Jesus, to be able to say Lord, Lord, is measured by obedience to his words. Jesus said, “Whoever has my commands and obeys them is the one who loves me. He who loves me will be loved by my father, and I too will love him and show myself to him” (John 14:21).

This is the critical point of the story about the house that doesn’t collapse, the Church that is strong, or the person who stands despite the storms in life, is the one who “dug down deep and laid the foundation on the rock” (Luke 6:48). In the days before mechanical diggers, or pneumatic drills, this required hard work and perseverance. So, using that picture, what happens when you dig down deep into the rock? Well, you dig down deep into the word of God to discover Jesus. You discover one who is creator and sustains all things, “for by him all things were created ....He is before all things and in him all things hold together,” (Colossians 1:16-17).

I have recently taken up running, recognising the need to be in good physical shape for the year that lies ahead. I run along the Dodder River, in south Dublin one of the three rivers serving the city of Dublin, the Tolka on the North Side and the Liffey in the centre. Last week I saw a bird that surprised me. A white wader bird with black beak, and long black legs and the most incredible yellow feet, and my research has identified this as a little egret.

I have seen it twice now and it made me happy, intrigued me and caused me to thank God for the wonder and beauty of His creation. The word of God tells us that we, humanity, are the pinnacle of creation. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27) Discovering Jesus as creator give us joy, stability, and security in who we are, identity, and the place and role we have in his world.

When you dig down deep into Jesus you discover that he had a perfect character and was the perfect man. You discover that He withstood temptation perfectly even when fasting and alone for 40 days and nights. He demonstrated powerful authority over evil as he cast out evil and unclean spirits from the lives of broken people, you marvel that He had such authority, when He spoke the wind and the waves obeyed him, men and women left everything to follow Him, and sickness was cured, and the dead were raised.

When He interacted with people they were changed, valued and encouraged. He was always in control patient and wise, He handled difficult questions with aplomb, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what his Gods” (Mark 12:17). He was the perfectly obedient son who loved His heavenly father and everyone else wholeheartedly. He was perfect man and perfect God. “The Son is the radiance of the Father’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word” (Hebrews 1:3).

The news about the leaders of the world is not good, it is easy to be disillusioned, to wonder who has any integrity and yet we believe that Jesus is the rock on which you can trust, a leader of integrity, of authority and wisdom. Jesus is a rock that is dependable and in whom we can have confidence.

When you dig down deep, you discover that Jesus’ motivation was personal and loving, you are the reason for His coming, you are the reason that He gave His life on the cross, where He defeated sin and its consequence death in his resurrection from the dead. You discover that Jesus chose us, came for us and loved us with an everlasting love and is forming us into a community that is loved to be loving.

In a world that increasingly struggles with loneliness and the fragmentation of community, we encounter in Scripture, in Jesus, one who loves you personally, gave His life to have relationship with you, and places you into a loving family the church. Yet when you dig down deep, and as you discover Jesus you will be shocked at the reality of your own heart. When I drill down into my heart, I discover and confront a mess of sin, with symptoms of fear, criticism, and selfishness.

It is in recognising our sin that we first come to faith in Christ and wonder at the amazing grace of our heavenly Father who loves us and welcomes us into His family as his children. “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are” (1 John 3:1).

We grow daily as we recognise our sin, repent of it and experience both forgiveness and more of the Holy Spirit and gradually we become more and more like Jesus. The root of sin is replaced by the root of Christ’s righteousness and as His children we gradually resemble his character, until we are perfected in glory.

We are not as we were; we are not yet as we will be, but we have confidence in his promises as the Apostle Paul told the Church in Philippi, “Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). As true for the Philippian church members then, as it was for the members of the congregations in Fermoy and Cahir in County Cork and County Tipperary, when I was their minister, just as it is for Adelaide Road members in Dublin, for us here this evening and all believers.

Jesus is our hope in the storms of life, and as our relationship with Jesus grows, we become more like Him and in that we are confident in Christ.

### **Our community**

I had the privilege of working in Kenya, and it was there that I more fully appreciated the importance of community over the priority of the individual. A well-known African proverb says, “it takes a village to raise a child”. So we dig down deep by reading, knowing and obeying the scriptures and we do this primarily in community.

Growth and confidence in Christ happen in community. In Adelaide Road Presbyterian church, we call our home groups 3D groups. That is developing prayer-filled relationships, by digging into God’s word and discussing how it impacts on the way we live. We dig down deep and lay the foundation on the rock, the word of God, in relationships within community, and this helps us build church and confidence in Christ.

Perhaps the age group most affected by the storm hitting the church and society hard are teenagers and young adults. Trying to make sense of the world and themselves they are faced with very different answers and world views.

I was encouraged and challenged by Mel Lacy's article in the May edition of the *Presbyterian Herald*. Mel works for Growing Young Disciples, and the article was titled 'The Great departure' and subtitled 'A sobering assessment of why young people are leaving our churches at a rapid rate.' In summary, Mel's highlighted the beauty of community, "We need the rising generations to know the church as their tribe, where they are known, loved, nurtured and welcomed."

An epilogue, or and illustrated talk alone, will not make the kind of young disciples who will survive in this hostile world. The word of God and patient application in the context of an all-age community that has their backs is needed. We will need to help and encourage them to dig down deep and know the scriptures, our catechism, our doctrine and walk in relationship with him, being wholehearted, life on life, with conviction. If we are to dig down deep in the Church, then our relationships need to be authentic and committed.

Listen to how the Apostle Paul describes his relationship with the church in Thessalonica. "As apostles of Christ we could have been a burden to you, but we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her children. We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well because you had become so dear to us."(1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

For all of us our confidence in Christ comes from digging down deep into God's word and that must happen in relationship within our churches - and I am really looking forward to visiting as many as I can throughout this forthcoming year, encouraging fellow brothers and sisters in Christ across this island of ours, and indeed further afield.

Confidence in Christ comes when we know Him, obey him and live in community with others who seek to follow him as disciples within the church with a focus that is outward and missional. This is how Jesus has built his Church throughout the last two millennia and it is how Christians have survived and thrived despite the hostility of the world in every generation.

As Jesus memorably says to us in this short story of a house that stood the test, the one who can be confident, “is like the one who dug down deep and laid the foundation on the rock...When the flood came, the torrent struck that house but could not shake it because it was well built” (Luke 6:48)

Let us be confident in Christ. Let us build well, let us dig down deep, into Christ and His word, for His glory alone. Amen.

**Ends.**

**Check against delivery**