

6th June 2016

Address by the Right Reverend Dr. Frank Sellar, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at his installation at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

“God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life”.

This verse from John’s gospel sets the context for this year’s ‘Fit for Purpose’ theme determined by the General Assembly. It is because God loved the world that we are called to be:

‘A community of global concern’, learning from and sharing with our brothers and sisters in the world church, while recognising with them those issues of concern for our stewardship of the world’s resources where together we must challenge injustice, poverty and oppression in Jesus’ name.

This is a staggeringly large, encompassing context... ‘world’... to quote Eugene Peterson in his book ‘The Unnecessary Pastor’. “World” in this phrase, means the whole thing— continents and oceans, city tenements and country barnyards, souls and societies, babies in the womb and women and men vigorously pursuing every imaginable venture for making money, helping the needy, grasping for power, exploiting the weak, discovering truth, growing food, making art, singing and playing. ‘World’ is teeming with good and evil. It is this ‘world’ for which Christ came and died, and into which we are called to be ministers of reconciliation.” (*P17 Unnecessary Pastor*)

It is for that reason that I have chosen to turn our attention to the book of Jonah for this week of General Assembly. Not because Jonah is a hero that we are to emulate, but because God is relentless in His pursuit of His servant to share His passion and participate in His purposes of grace toward the world in all its complexity, wickedness and need.

It is therefore with embarrassment I recognise in Jonah, not a champion to be celebrated, but a fellow believer and member of the church of Christ Jesus – who needs to be converted all over again and conformed after the likeness of the begotten Son, through whom and for whom this world was created.

And so we read “the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai: *‘Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me’*”.

Chapter 3 tells us that Nineveh was a violent and evil place. God cares about this world in all its complexity, wickedness and need.

The trouble was, God’s Prophet set apart by God in order to be God’s representative did not! God said ‘Go’ and Jonah said ‘No’.

God called Jonah to preach in Nineveh, so Jonah chose instead to go to the beach in Joppa!

And there he ran away from the Lord by getting on board a ship and sailing to Tarshish; the furthest possible place known to human kind in the then known globe.

God cares about the world in all its difficulties, violence and troubles, whereas Jonah the believer couldn’t care less.

Have you ever heard the charge that the church is full of hypocrites?

Well, the Bible is not shy to agree! This may come as a surprise to some, but church is not for those who think that they are good, church is for those who recognise that they are not good – but that there is one who is good!

The purpose of a hospital is not for the healthy but in order to help sick people become well; and the purpose of the church is not that Christians relax in their own spiritual wellbeing but that idolators might become worshippers of the One True Living Lord.



This year, the Council for Church and Society will be bringing a 'Vision for Society' statement to the Assembly, acknowledging that we are far from the people we ought to be but in the hope that these life-giving sentiments will become a lived out policy.

Let me quote part of it:

We, Members of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland

saved by grace

and called by God to grace-filled relationships,

in the power of the Holy Spirit

as ambassadors of Christ's Kingdom

in a broken and divided world:

Believe that the good news of Jesus Christ

challenges and equips us

to develop radically new attitudes and relationships

with our neighbours throughout the whole of Ireland.

We confess our failure

to live as Biblically faithful Christian peace builders

and to promote the counter culture of Jesus

in a society where cultures clash.

Accordingly, we affirm Christian peace building

to be part of Christian discipleship.

And so from this evening's Bible passage let us acknowledge and confess four failures of which we, as part of the church in Ireland, North and South, are culpable. Not in order to beat ourselves up, but in order to seek Christ's forgiveness for and the Holy Spirit's empowering to be a community of Global concern.

1. Confession number one. Bigotry. Jonah was a bigot. Yes, we can understand where Jonah was coming from. He was an Israelite. 2 Kings 14 tells us he was a prophet in the northern kingdom during the reign of King Jeroboam 750 years before Christ. The great powerhouse of Assyria was his feared and hated enemy. They had done his wee country untold harm and so as a Hebrew, Jonah loved his nation more than he loved the Lord who had made the nations, and Jonah feared the Ninevites more than he feared the Lord. And so instead of obeying God's call, Jonah did all he could to resist God's Word to preach to the people he did not know and ran away from interacting with those he refused to like.

In this part of the world we too have every reason to feel hurt, because many of us have been. In this land of ours there are many good reasons why we may legitimately fear and hold grudges against those who wish us harm, but the gospel tells us that perfect love casts out fear and where Jesus is present fear is driven away. Christ Jesus who is love wants those within whom His Spirit dwells to be set free in order to serve expansively and love lavishly, rather than to retreat narrowly into the constricted sectarian borders of our restricted minds.

It's fascinating that when the Apostle Paul confronted Peter in Galatians Chapter 2 over his attitude to eating with Gentile Christians in Antioch, he didn't tell him off for being racist. He told him his actions were wrong because he wasn't acting in line with the truth of the gospel. Yes, Jonah was a bigot, but God cannot condone bigotry in any shape or form and there is quite simply no place for it in the lives of those who have been forgiven by Jesus.

2. Confession number two. Selfishness. Jonah was selfish. It's interesting to see how when Jonah ran away from the Lord, Jonah was completely oblivious to the calamity which was all around him. Although a storm raged round about them he couldn't care less about the trauma his fellow passengers might be experiencing; he was wholly unfeeling that they were about to lose everything they had within a tiny craft upon the Mediterranean Sea, nor was he in the slightest bit bothered about the lives of the sailors who were doing their level best to rescue their fragile ship from disintegrating.

But when confronted with Jonah's selfishness do you find it at all disconcerting to contrast that with the pagan sailors astonishing efforts to lighten the load, to rescue the ship and to bring Jonah back home safe and sound? Sure, their good deeds weren't enough to put them in a right relationship with God (why else would God have had to send Jesus in order to do that), but their ordinary decent humanity was more impressive than the selfish believing Jonah who was completely indifferent to the physical needs of the people. Which worries you most? The good deeds displayed by pagan unbelievers or the lack of kindness demonstrated by the Hebrew prophet? The generous attitude of those who worship other gods, or the meanness of spirit and selfishness of some who profess the name of the Saviour?

In James Chapter 2 Jesus' brother asks this potent question: "Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food; if one of you say to them, 'Go I wish you well: keep warm and well fed' but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is that? I tell you, faith without actions is dead." Jonah couldn't care less about people but God couldn't care more, and quite simply there is no excuse for lack of concern for people in the lives of those who have received so much generosity from Jesus.

3. Bigotry, selfishness, and confession number three, lack of concern about God who created the environment. When the pagan sailors confronted Jonah and shamed him into calling upon the One True Living Lord, he gave his testimony. *"Tell us, who is responsible for making all this trouble? What do you do? Where do you come from? What is your country? From what people are you?"* And Jonah answered, *"I am a Hebrew and I worship the Lord, the God of Heaven, who made the sea and the dry land."*

This terrified them! The pagan sailors were petrified because Jonah confessed that he worshipped no localized tribal deity. He was not beholden to some provincial sectarian lord. No, he worshipped the Creator of Heaven and Earth!

In Psalm 121 we sing, *“I to the hills will lift mine eyes, from whence doth come mine aid? My safety cometh from the Lord, who heaven and earth hath made! My help is not from the hills but from the Lord who made the hills!”* or *“This earth belongs to God, the world, its wealth and all its people”* (Psalm 24) and when Jonah failed to honour the God of this world by his actions, or rather by his lack of actions he was failing to live as the steward of God’s creation.

One of the ways in which people who have no knowledge of God can see the respect for which Christians hold the God who created Heaven and Earth, is the way in which believers show practical care and concern for the environment He has made. Contemporary society has so lost perspective and commodified things that almost everything seems to get thrown away.

If believers buy into this false god of rampant consumerism and disposability, that breeds a culture of the temporary, the faddish, and the superficial. As postmodernity bites deeper and deeper, even into church life, those who love the Lord Jesus must rail against this deadly virus. This world has been lent to us as a gift to be carefully cared for and nurtured, not as a possession to be carelessly exploited and mutilated. Since Psalm 148 tells us that every part of creation offers praise to the Creator God, every time any species of plant or animal is obliterated, or the sea and dry land subjected to rising temperatures due to selfish human activity, not only are the poorest peoples of this world those who suffer most, but the quality of worship offered to the ‘Living Lord of global concern’ is actually diminished – and this should not be.

Bigotry, selfishness, lack of care about God who created this environment, and fourthly, the concluding failure which we as the people of God must repent of, is our lack of concern about peoples’ eternal wellbeing.

4. Jonah had a *vital* task to perform. The Lord, the God of Heaven who made the sea and dry land, called Jonah to do something hugely significant. Something of everlasting significance. God charged Jonah to go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it because of its wickedness. Wrong deeply offends God and leads to judgment. Good, however, delights the heart of God and leads to life.

In his book 'The Reason for God', Timothy Keller carefully argues that it is precisely because we believe in a God who will judge justly and put things right that believers do not have to take vengeance into their own hands and be sucked into the endless vortex of retribution. Quoting Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf: *"If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end to violence – that God would not be worthy of worship"*.

This world is not all that there is, and one day all wrongs will be put right. But Jonah did not want to proclaim God's message of righteousness to Nineveh. Jonah was all too aware that if judgment was proclaimed, there was every possibility that people might actually respond and be saved. But Jonah didn't want the people of Nineveh to react positively to God's gracious invitation and be changed. And so that is why the Lord graciously granted Jonah a visual aid, and having had Jonah cast into the raging torrents of the Great Sea, God rescued Jonah from certain destruction and drowning through salvation from within the belly of the Great Fish.

It was a powerful illustration to the reluctant prophet of the great compassion that the great God of this entire globe wished to extend to the pagan people of Nineveh. It was the same message that Jesus proclaimed from the start of His ministry: "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near." Or the message that He spoke to the Church of Sardis in Revelation Chapter 3, "Remember what you have received and heard. Obey it and repent."

Jonah loved the grace of God when it was for himself but resented it when it was offered to others who were not like him. But this will not do! Those who have been saved by God's grace have an obligation to do what no one else can do, and that is to make known that salvation is to be found in no one else but Jesus. God hates evil. God despises murder and injustice, those things that lead to poverty and oppression, and God wants people to stop doing wrong and start doing right. And if believers in Jesus do not share a concern for peoples' eternal wellbeing, who else will?

But as Jonah knew full well, this is not something that could either be achieved through human ability, nor in his own strength. No amount of trying hard to do what is right can bring about supernatural change, for transformation of the will can only come about through the power of the cross where God's love and justice meet.

Jesus said, *"A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign, but none will be given except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For even as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three nights in the heart of the earth"*. Right and wrong matters! It matters so much to the God of global concern that "He gave his One and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his Son into the world in order to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

Unlike Jonah who said 'No' to God and reverted to his default position of bigotry, selfishness, and lack of care for the Lord of this world, Christ Jesus obediently said 'Yes' to his Father's will and calls those within whom His Holy Spirit dwells, to do the same. For Jesus not only demonstrated His Father's global concern by the message He proclaimed, but by the action He took when willingly He suffered and died on a cross, so that those who deserved nothing but judgment and death might instead be set free and granted life in all its fullness.

CS Lewis once said, *"God cannot give happiness and peace apart from himself for apart from God there is no such thing."* But by His life and through His death and resurrection, Christ Jesus extends His invitation to repent. To be converted all over again. To find re-priority and receive a brand new start. Bigotry matters. People matter. The God of our environment matters. Right and wrong matters.

This year, may we as the people of God repent of our lack of care for these critical issues highlighted here in Jonah Chapter 1, and with His strength as a branch of Christ's church in this island at this time, be a community of Global concern. Amen.

Ends.

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