**Strictly embargoed 20:00hrs**

**4th June 2018**

**Address by the Rt. Rev. Dr. Noble McNeely, 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.**

I have told the story of the ‘The Starfish Thrower’ a few times.

One day a writer was walking along the shore, he looked down the beach and saw a young fellow, picking up small objects, and throwing them into the ocean.

He came closer and saw he was throwing starfish into the sea. He asked the young person why he was throwing starfish into the ocean?"

The young fellow replied, "The sun is up and the tide is going out. If I don't throw them in, they'll die."

The older man hearing this commented, "But, young man, do you not realize that there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds starfish all along every mile? You can't possibly make a difference!"

At this, the young man bent down, threw another starfish into the sea. As it landed in the water, he said, "It made a difference for that one.”

The theme for the Special Assembly in 2017 - and the theme I emphasised during the past twelve months - has been ‘Everyday Disciples’.

In the gospels Jesus called His disciples to leave behind their everyday bread-winning occupation of being men who caught fish, to become followers of Jesus who would catch men/people.

The transformation took place in the familiar lake of Galilee where the fishermen had gained years of experience catching fish. Simon Peter, James and John had been trained from childhood to fish and they knew all the local tricks when it came to catching fish. They had been on the lake at night when potentially the best catch was possible, but they had caught nothing.

Jesus, a novice fisherman, who had no training it seemed in fishing instructed the experts to go out again and let down their nets. The result was amazing they caught so much it took two boats to get them to shore.

Peter was overwhelmed by what he saw. He stepped back and recognised his weak faith, that he was falling far short from what he should be, a sinner, ill equipped to be a follower of Jesus.

This is where true discipleship begins, we humbly recognise that we can only be everyday disciples by the grace and help of God. But we ought not to say that our life and witness will make no difference. God places us where we can be used - like the boy on the beach there is always something to be done that can make a difference.

This story of a large catch of fish and also the parallel Easter story when Jesus cried out to Peter from the shore to cast the net on the other side of the boat have been challenging me. When Peter and the other fishermen were frustrated and caught nothing they responded to Christ’s voice and dropped the net on the right side where they caught an abundance of fish.

This story I believe also speaks to us as a church. My experience over the past few months has been of a church with great potential, of people who have many abilities and gifts, of congregations engaged in numerous ministries and work. We have a church experienced in mission, in community outreach and reaching across barriers, in social care and support of the weak, in regular children’s work and youth work and in building new facilities. We have ministers and ministry teams working long hours and committed to evangelism. But, are we seeing the net catching the people Christ has sent us out to catch?

We think that the Church will not succeed unless we are doing all these things in our church programmes. We have always done church this way, created a busy church, and been seen to be active - trying to make an impression. We may think we have done things this way in the past, and if it isn’t broken there is no need to fix it.

However we are experiencing a culture today that is changed, there is a sea change taking place and in the midst of it we need to listen for Christ speaking to us. Is He saying cast the net differently? If we are to catch people and make a difference, have we as disciples to cast the net differently? Are we as a church to listening to Christ through prayer and His call upon our lives to shake up how we do things?

The message we share is consistent. We hold firmly to the belief that Christ died and rose again for our salvation. That trust in Jesus will satisfy every need of the human heart. That the demonstration of Christ’s unconditional love is transformative.

I have had the privilege over the past few months of seeing churches that have been listening for the voice of Jesus and have cast the net metaphorically on the other side of the boat. Many of those churches have been using the discipleship course, ‘Essentials’ that was produced by the Council for Congregational Life and Witness and it has been effective throughout the Church in inspiring people to be committed everyday disciples with the desire to be fishers of people. If your church hasn’t used this course I commend it to you.

In our churches if we continue casting the net through the activities we offer with limited results, then I believe we have to respond to the voice of Christ and do things differently. If we are to have a voice in the public square, if we are to demonstrate what Christ means to us, if we are to be missional and declare the transforming power of the gospel, we must be prepared to hear the voice of Jesus instructing us to cast the net differently.

As everyday disciples in our work place, in our universities, in our rugby or football club, in our council chamber, is there another way to cast the net as we seek to witness to God’s grace. When radical change is required and the net is cast on the right side Jesus can surprise us. The nets may be full again some day.

**Ends.**

**Check against delivery**