

Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs

3 June 2019

Address by the Rt Rev Dr William Henry, following his election as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

If you are fortunate enough to have more than one living room in your house, I want to imagine the “Good Room.” You will know what this is. This is the fancy room, the room that is so well kitted out that actually no one hardly ever goes into. This is the room where you can go to look at the marks the vacuum cleaner leaves on the carpet because no one ever steps into the room and where the cushions are neatly fluffed and positioned. Why do you have these rooms?

Actually in our manse – we don’t even know what you call it – I call it the blue room – because of the wallpaper. Nora calls it the green room because that’s the dominant colour in the settee in that room (I find that doubly confusing because we actually have another room where the wallpaper is green). The kids probably call it the torture chamber because that’s where the piano and other musical instruments stay.

But this is the place where you can go to escape everyone else. This is the place where everything is arranged correctly. Now of course you never actually want to go into that room because you’d only ruin the good order – but By standing at the doorway and staring at everything in this room you can make yourself think – I’m in control here. I’m on top of the world. It’s cheap therapy, you should try it!

Even for the most committed of us because of the pressures and busyness of life but also perhaps because of the daily routine of sameness, that is a picture of how many of us relate to God. In that you admire him from a distance but you don’t actually get up close and really make a connection with him.

It was exactly for that reason that I want to take as my theme for the year “enjoying God.” We’ve just read a passage from Romans. John Stott in commenting here writes that the main characteristic, the defining mark of a Christian is to be joy. Look at v2 “and we rejoice in the hope of glory”; v3 “not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings” and then down to v11 “we also rejoice in God”

The flow of the passage, the weight of the meaning is that to live life as you were intended, to get the most from life you need to have a deep wellspring of joy. And that enjoyment of God comes from a vibrant transforming relationship with God

So just pause there - what about you? Could it be said that you have lost a bit of that joy? It’s like you are back at that image I started with tonight of the good room - you are sort of staring through the door, admiring God at a distance.

Of course, this is something I believe resonates with the whole of humanity. The average man in the street may not talk about “enjoying God” – but he will talk about happiness. But the thing about happiness is that it’s hard to nail down!

And there is always the fear that when we finally get the experience or the object or the status that we feel will make us happy – that in the end it will disappoint. Giving your heart to someone or something will at the very least make you vulnerable. Eg

I read on Facebook recently “ I’m joe and I’ve got a 9 year old son Mark – we’re both Liverpool supporters – he thinks it’s always been this good”

If you are a Liverpool fan you will have revelled in the comments of the past couple of weeks especially after the second Barcelona match– there is no other team like Liverpool; there is no other team that could pull thing like that from the bag; that’s the magic of Anfield”. Sure the 70’s and 80’s were great but there’s been a host of disappointments between those days and now.

And that's why a lot of smart people say the only way to get through life is to give up on chasing happiness. So they say... Don't start following a team. Don't allow yourself to be vulnerable. Don't give your heart to anyone. It will only end in tears they say. But that's not an answer to get us through life as that only makes us hard and cold and dispassionate.

Which is why I want to return to my theme of Enjoying God. I believe that Christian Joy gives us an entirely different way to get through life. The joy that God gives is so different it changes your life. Isn't that what many of us have found?

And the reason is because Christian joy is not based on your circumstances. Now that turns the conventional wisdom of the world on its head. Conventional wisdom says to be happy you've got to have favourable conditions. It's like the advice written on the label when you buy a plant – it will tell you - you need lots of sunlight, you need plenty of water, you need food. Skip any of these. -and it's goodbye plant. But read...v3 “ we rejoice in our sufferings”

Read on into v3-4. What that is saying is that we can rejoice even in the negative experiences of life because we know God is working through these things – he's doing something in us through it all. And it all culminates in hope. Now there's a word for modern day living!

Kevin DeYoung wrote an essay in which he gave the secret to reaching the next generation for God. He pointed out that at one and the same time it is both incredibly simple and incredibly difficult. It's not about being cool and trendy. It's not about drinking fancy coffees. It's to live like Jesus. To show them Jesus. To give them Hope for the future.

We need to grab them with passion

We need to win them with Love

We need to hold them with holiness

And we need to challenge them with Truth

That must be a challenge to us to embody and to show the love of Jesus demonstrated in normal living. People will not give Christianity a second thought if it seems lifeless, rote and uninspiring. You cannot pass on what you do not feel yourself. That is why I feel so strongly about my theme for the year – Enjoying God. Benjamin Franklin was castigated when he went to hear George Whitefield preach – “sure you don’t believe a thing he says!” to which he answered – “Yes, but he does!”

It makes no difference whether your church building is old or new, whether it’s big or small, or whether whatever you do in it is formal or casual – you need a passion and a joy for Jesus. This joy is so different from anything that life offers and it’s this joy that should be seen in a Christian and whenever Christians gather together and it all points to the fact that Jesus is unique and is worth following. This is what the Presbyterian Church ought to be known for when they are talking about us

This is a message of hope for everyone. Inside the church. Outside the church. We are all the same flesh and blood. We face the same health uncertainties. Every one of us is on the same daily treadmill. We need hope to transform our present experience, and I believe this passage is telling us that this hope is found in enjoying God.

I do believe the gospel can transform life and our experiences

Think of just some modern-day traumas

Our journalists and media outlets do a really good job alerting us to the injustices of society and the pain that exists behind many closed doors. Reading the news I’m reminded, too often people are left to carry impossible burdens alone. Our communities are blighted by the lack of provision for people with health issues. And the predicaments of many who battle mental health issues and particularly our younger folk for whom it is compounded with the negative effects of social media. If you are a parent or a teacher you will know these things first hand.

Where is enjoying God in all these moments and in the lives of these families?

We don't make light of these issues and some people have to bear these burdens for an inordinate time and that fog never seems to lift. But as I read the bible and understand the gospel, I see that Jesus can transform these experiences. Jesus said: I am with you to the end of the age, You are not alone. We need to hear that.

But as a church we've got to reach out and connect with people in their needs. We can't just look on, we've got to get involved. Your church like mine are able to tell their own story— look what George is doing and how Sarah is getting alongside other people. Whether that is volunteering in prison ministry or with the homeless or mentoring young people or initiating mental health ministries. Isn't it great when someone in church approaches you and says can we do this to help meet this problem?

Going one step further I believe the Gospel can transform even what we might term the failures of life – we can still be enjoying God.

Now sometimes we are the ones who have messed up – we've messed up at work or we've messed up relationships. We're the ones who failed. At other times the mess is all around us because other people have done stuff or they are not doing stuff. They are ones who have failed.

Taking the widest possible picture - we could imagine what we perceive to be a lack of political progress in the UK on Brexit, but also locally with little progress towards effective governance - we could see these things as failures. With the rest of society we can shout and we can lobby and indeed there must be a voice from the church in that – and we have a distinctive voice.

But even here in the middle of what can be felt as failure we can still enjoy God.

Because we can remind ourselves of a creative God who until the entrance of sin had made a perfect world. So even when we fail personally in our actions and in our words, when we feel we as a church fail and have not communicated well enough the love of Jesus as we should, when we feel our politicians fail, when we feel our institutions fail - we remind ourselves God doesn't fail.

In our hardship and struggles we look to see what it is that God has been aiming to do around us, through us and in us to put these things right

We need to make the step to enjoy God right now, right where we are and see where that leads us. My plea to our church goes back to that image of the good room – stop staring through the door at something that looks great from a distance. Jump right in. bounce on the settee. Enjoy the fullness of God with confidence.

Ends.

Check against delivery