

Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs

1 June 2020

Speaking note and address by the Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, following his election as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, by the 2020 Standing Commission of the General Assembly, at a special installation event this evening, in Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

My first and happy task is to thank you William. You have served the church tirelessly and with great energy over the last 12 months – but then, you are a young man.

Like your recent predecessors, you have been a prodigious tweeter, allowing the wider church family to follow your progress from place to place, as you, often with Nora and your children, have travelled throughout Ireland, and overseas. We have appreciated your emphasis on the theme, Enjoying God – something which you evidently do yourself.

For the last three months, your pattern of service as Moderator has had to adjust as from 23 March the lockdown regulations changed pretty much everything for us. You have led worship online each week, looking helpfully at the book of Habakkuk, and you have carefully sought to support ministers throughout the church, not least by committing to phone each Manse before the completion of your term of office – something which was very widely appreciated. I'd love to see your phone bill.

William, the Church is grateful to you, and in your debt – and we wish you, Nora, Bethany, Megan and Connor God's blessing as you return to Maze and Ballinderry to pick up the threads of local ministry again – albeit in a very different way than when you left them a year ago. (I can neither hug you nor shake hands with you, so I'll simply wave!)

I want also to thank our Presbyteries for their nomination and this General Assembly Commission for placing their confidence in me to take up this role for the year.

In a moment, I want to turn to this story of Ruth to introduce my Moderator's theme for the year. But first, I want to make some preliminary remarks about the unusual situation we all find ourselves in – exemplified by the empty hall before us, and that you the congregation, are watching online.

I am under no illusions about the sensitivity and complexity of the matters before us, at a time when we are prevented from meeting face to face. And I recognise that beyond the COVID-19 emergency, our society remains in a state of flux, where pressures to embrace a new social agenda have been growing steadily. Aspects of this are of course very good, and are to be welcomed – others less so.

We hope and pray that in coming months and years the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly will be able to share power, devise policy, pass laws, and lead by collaborative example in a society still emerging from the dark years of sectarian conflict. We don't think this is a pipe dream, but is what the people have elected our politicians to deliver.

We look forward to the formation of stable government in the Republic, recognising the challenges connected with forming a coalition administration, following a set of closely fought elections.

We commit to praying for political leaders of whatever party and in whichever jurisdiction, seeing God's hand in their appointment - as Scripture teaches us – while also holding them to account for their actions – as democracy requires of us.

It will not be long before Brexit becomes headline news again on both sides of the border, and we note carefully the continuing commitment of the UK government to the transition date of 31 December this year. Let me state clearly that we Presbyterians see this island as our home, and we welcome conversations about its long term future and its relations with its neighbours, and if invited will be active participants in any dialogue which may emerge as both sets of Irish relations with Europe and Great Britain are worked out in detail.

Much has been said about the continuing impact of coronavirus, and the General Assembly Commission will receive reports this week from church bodies which have been working on our own responses internally to what has happened. More widely, and in dealing with this crisis, Health Ministers, Robin Swann in Northern Ireland and Simon Harris in the Republic are to be commended for the leadership they have given so far. If there is to be a “new normal” at some point to come, perhaps we might hope that some of the richest learning we have gleaned might endure as abiding features of Irish life – things like generosity, community spirit, volunteering for practical care and warm appreciation for good work well done.

The COVID-19 emergency has refocused our attention on the need for excellent care in the community. If a weakness has been exposed here, (and who could argue otherwise) it behoves us to put it right.

The most vulnerable ought to be our first, not our last priority in caring – and we commend the incredible commitment of all on the front line, in particular those in our health services, and care home staff, working in difficult conditions across the sector...and note among them the wonderful work of the Presbyterian care teams working in our 14 residential facilities across the country.

If it is part of our calling to care for people in the closing stages of their lives, this is surely true for people at the earliest stages of their lives also. It has been deeply distressing to see the radical liberalisation of the law in both jurisdictions regarding abortion. Like all ethical issues, there must surely be a point of principle upon which our decisions rest, and we as a church affirm again that life is holy to God, and that the most vulnerable in society deserve the most assiduous protection from society – and this includes the unborn. In this week when the Northern Ireland Assembly will address the issue, we encourage legislators to listen carefully to the persuasive call of people such as Heidi Crowter, a lady with Down’s syndrome who powerfully makes the case against abortion for non-fatal disabilities.

The publication of the book *Considering Grace* during the year has ensured that the way we address the past must be with honesty and directness, hearing from those most affected even if what they say to us is sometimes hard truth. Ireland will mark 100 years since partition next May, and I sincerely hope we will be able to speak of this in ways that are nourishing, both to those who welcome partition and those who lament it. How we feel and speak about the past weaves the fabric of our dreams for the future. Ireland has struggled with this for generations. Surely, we can do better?

I hope that with God's help, I as your Moderator with others will be able to speak into these and other issues, to help our church participate in the conversations, and with the hope that the deep-seated Christian heritage of this island is neither set aside nor forgotten amidst the massive changes we are witnessing.

Let me repeat; this island is our home. It is where we have been called to live and serve for the Kingdom of God and the common good. Within that home we have another, for we are the family of God, and our home is his church. Within that home we have yet another, for we have dual citizenship on earth and also in heaven which too, is our home. The story of Ruth is a compelling glimpse into the heart of God for his world – and this picture of homecoming will resonate with uprooted people everywhere. My theme for the year will therefore consider multiple aspects of this biblical picture of Home.

A few words then, on Ruth's story. Ruth has lost everything. Her husband has died, and she has no other means of support, at a time of national calamity - the crops have failed and there is little food. What is she to do? Her mother-in-law Naomi gives her advice. Go back home to Moab, to your Mother's house to ride things out. She repeats it, and says it to both her daughters in law. One, Orpah agrees, and off she goes. Ruth however refuses, and decides that even though she has the option of going back to her people, something deep is stirring within her, drawing her to a new home altogether.

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.”

This close and obviously loving relationship between these two women from different cultures, languages, histories, and backgrounds opened a door to something much deeper. Your people will be my people. Your God, my God.

I get frustrated sometimes when migration policies describe pulling down the shutters on our borders, as if the motives of those who wish to come to live among us are universally selfish, or even corrupt. Of course we need to be wise, and our policies need to reflect this wisdom, but we must never lose sight of the cost involved in leaving behind everything a person has known and loved, including perhaps family and livelihood, to make a new life in a new place. The risks are enormous. The cost incalculable. The drive to do it, irresistible.

And neither as a church can we lose sight of what God in his grace may do with such a moment of dislocation and relocation. Your people will be my people. Your God, my God. We might say, your home, will be my home.

There is a teasing thought in the text, which Ben read in verse 22 at the end of the chapter. The text says that Naomi and Ruth returned from Moab to Israel. Well, Naomi returned but Ruth had never been there before, so how could she return? And yet by her decision to become one with Naomi and her people, she had acquired a new home – a home not defined by geography and borders and barriers, and front doors and garden fences, but by belonging to God. She came home to a place she had never been before. We need to have a growing vision of the world-changing power of being at home with God and his people, and how this can transcend our basic human antipathies and enmities.

If this is what our home is like, then let us be those who readily welcome others because God has first shown us hospitality in Christ. He has welcomed us, and adopted us into his family. Ours must therefore be a home with doors that are open to be places of welcome and adoption of others.

If this is what our home is like, then let us be willing to share it with those for whom this is their new home – “New Irish” who have arrived among us from other places around the world. Increasingly they will bless us, and change us for good, if we let them.

If this is what our home is like then let us pray that it might be a place of refuge for those who need it most – and perhaps especially now, for people whose health of mind has become a burden, not a blessing.

If this is what our home is like, then let it be a place of nurture and learning, for the youngest and oldest among us, so that they glimpse God’s big story, and take their place in living it out. May theirs be a rich faith in Christ that is not easily lost.

If this is what our home is like, then let it be a place of prayer, where we can without awkwardness or difficulty, express our utter helplessness before God, and our complete dependence upon him for everything – even when the path ahead is unknown and unimaginable – as today, it is.

If this is what our home is like, then let it be a place of generosity, even when in these days, we might have less to give. May we be known for this. May it be our reputation that we are a people with open hands to give away what we have.

If this is what our home is like, then let it be a place of conversation around God’s Word, to open Scripture, absorb Scripture, be nurtured by Scripture, to devour Scripture as if it was the sweetest honey, and that we are hungry for more.

If this is what our home is like, let it be a lovely place, where you O God, delight to live by your Spirit.

Amen.

Benediction

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and for evermore! Amen.

Ends.

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