

Strictly embargoed 12.30pm

4 October 2021

Address by the Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland reflecting on his year in office, made at the Opening Service of Worship at the 2021 General Assembly held this morning in Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

In reflecting on the year that is past, I could simply list all the struggles we have faced, and speak of Covid, furlough, vaccinations, social distancing, face-coverings, Brexit, the Northern Ireland Protocol, street violence, lockdowns, Container ships grounded in the Suez Canal, Interrupted supply chains, Shortages of everything, postponements, cancellations, global recession, bushfires, tropical cyclones, cancel culture, failed sustainable development goals, mental health crises, toppling statues, church leadership scandals, and Zoom. Small wonder perhaps that Time magazine labelled 2020 as “one of the worst years to be alive in modern history”.

Yet 2020 was the year our grandson was born – and his smile lights up the room. It was the year I was privileged to celebrate 100th birthdays with 17 centenarians around the church, and was deeply moved by their stories. During this year, I heard stories of congregations growing while in lockdown – of the curious and afraid, finding hope and forgiveness in Christ online while watching our ministers explain the gospel. This was the year when molds were broken and new ways of doing and being church were conceived. Yes it’s been hard, but as I often quote from Frederick Faber’s great old hymn, Thrice blessed is he to who is given, the instinct that can tell, that God is on the field when he is most invisible.

I was greatly struck by what amounts to a pastoral letter to ministers and church leaders, written recently by Scott Sauls. He reflects on comments from sociologists wondering about what we have just been through, and a phrase which has emerged to describe it which is *The Great Resignation*. Friendships have not been maintained. Communities have not been nurtured. Damage has been done in families. Churches have squabbled. Marriages have been placed under pressure. Employees have been furloughed, and may not always return. Fellowship has been broken. I’d like to quote a paragraph from what Scott Sauls has written.

He says, “Many Christian leaders feel heavy as they find themselves stuck in the crossfire. This is especially true of bridge-building types who work hard to keep themselves above the fray of partisan division and rancour”. And he then describes how such bridge-builders can become targets for criticism from all sides of a deeply riven culture, perhaps especially on social media.

The language used in this season has become deeply confrontational, and even offensive, as people have taken up dogmatic positions on the big issues of the day. We are blinded and deafened by caricatures. Being civil is a revolutionary act. Conformist mask-wearers confront freedom loving anti-vaxers. Homophobic bigots face off against gay affirming sell-outs. Social conservatives, too rigid by half, look across the hall at social liberals, theologically too accommodating. Ministers and pastors – and indeed debating chambers like this - find themselves pulled in all directions, pressured by some to be too direct to call themselves true priests and seen by others to be too cowardly to call themselves true prophets. Long friendships have been strained, comforting conversations have been set aside. This has not been an easy time to discern the mind of Christ, and having done so to the best of our abilities and insights, then to absorb the angst and pain of others in this unhinged climate. And yet, if this is not the calling of the minister and the church we serve, then what is?

My theme for the year has been Home – and home has been one of the places where these polarities have surfaced with most disruption. Craig Storti writes this. “The essence of home can be described in three key elements; familiar places, familiar people and routines, and predictable patterns of interaction.” These three elements create the space for the feelings of security, understanding, trust, safety and belonging we all crave, and associate with Home. Home (in other words) ought to be a place of Shalom. During this pandemic, our homes have been changed forever so that for many of us, insecurity, uncertainty and anxiety have become our norm. Home is not home, it is our office, our workspace, a place where do politics, not peace.

This is not Shalom. Because of this and other observations, the care of our ministers their families and other leaders across the church needs to remain a central priority. The Refresh initiative earlier this year which brought small groups of ministers together for prayer and encouragement, followed by a week of stepping back from frontline work for reading, teaching, rest and exercise, gave permission to us to recognise the importance of this investment of time and energy in mutual care – and in the scaffolding of home and our families. I hope it continues.

I built a platform for the year – as much for myself as anyone else – by preaching through Ephesians during those long months of lockdown. It was a kind of personal tutorial and reminder to me of the business we are in. Ultimately the message of Ephesians is that the impossible needs to be the first item on the agenda for the church. The impossibility of ancient enemies becoming not only friends, but family – adopted as sons and daughters of God in Christ – such an impossibility is an inevitable outcome of the gospel when it is properly explained and daringly lived out. What a message for Ireland today. What a message for Europe today. What a message for a world absorbing the impact of global movements of populations on a scale never before seen in human history, settling in new places, and making these places not a stop-off point for refugees on the move, but a new home completely.

If Jews and Gentiles can find a common inheritance in Christ then surely we can too. Perhaps the way we welcome international newcomers into our fellowships will be a prophetic act which will help us imagine church with a new face, something which might tutor us to transcend our ancient enmities.

This may not sit easily with a model of leadership which has been expounded and demonstrated in the world during the past year, in politics, commerce, the academy and which all-too-easily has been absorbed in some quarters by the church. Bombastic, abrasive, aggressive, confrontational, and playing to the innate populist prejudices within us all. Can you imagine such a mega-personality style of leader attempting to nurture the church at Ephesus?

Such an experiment would have destroyed the church there serving only to divide what Christ had so selflessly died to meld together. Paul was a man of the deepest theological convictions, and passionate too, but married this with a servant heart and a pastor's passion for his people.

As a church we need to carefully avoid perpetuating models of control which play to the loudest gallery, while seeking to live faithfully and well to the standards Christ demands of us. Jesus' self-description as gentle and lowly in heart, is neither spineless nor soft, but a robust challenge to those of us called to lead, that we do so to win the people, not to control them, to restore the sinful, not alienate them, to bind up the broken, not worsen their hurt, and to act as ambassadors of Christ in such a way that he will say to us at the end, "Well done, good and faithful servant".

My final reflection on the last 16 months, and before we continue to the next business is to pay tribute to colleagues here in Assembly Buildings – David Allen (Deputy Clerk), Karen Jardine (Public Affairs officer), Mark Smith (Press Officer officer) Susan Hamilton, (my assiduous PA), and the administrative team in the General Secretaries Department, Jenny, Alicia, and Denise.

The leader of this team of course is the Clerk, Trevor Gribben. Our longstanding friendship has survived the year I'm glad to say, and I am full of admiration for him, and want to publicly express the indebtedness of the whole church to him, especially for the detailed and careful way he has summarised the guidelines and restrictions which have faced us all, and then lobbied and campaigned in the world of government bureaucracies north and south of the border on our behalf. This of course has been achieved in addition to his normal duties as Clerk and General Secretary. Thank you, Trevor for all you do, and have done this year.

I would like to thank my Chaplains, Ben Walker and Helen Freeburn, for their support and encouragement during the year.

Lastly, I would like to thank my wife Zoe for her steadfast love and support to me. This has been an odd year for a Moderator's spouse – never an easy role at the best of times. She has had to prop me up when I have felt weak at the knees, an occurrence which I confess has been too frequent to admit or describe to you today.

But it is to the Lord that we ultimately return all praise. I invite you all to stand (with face-coverings) as we sing the hymn All my hope on God is founded.

Ends.

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