

Strictly embargoed 20:00 hrs

1 June 2020

Address by the Rt Rev Dr William Henry, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the installation of his successor, Rev Dr David Bruce, by the 2020 Standing Commission of the General Assembly, at a special installation event this evening, in Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

With the 75th Anniversary of VE Day a couple of weeks ago, I was reminded of the many war stories I used to read. One of my favourite stories was about inflatable tanks. Eager to deceive the Germans, the Allies got a team of artists and designers to create a fake army. One that would look real enough to aerial surveillance.

They built planes that were simply wooden shells. They made tanks out of inflatable rubber. They sent a few real soldiers and airmen into local towns to blab a false story of a gathering army. However, this was an army that was meant to be seen but not to fight. They had the appearance of an army, but none of the costs. And what was amazing was that this worked and that the Germans were deceived.

At its heart this is an illustration of authenticity.

And in many ways, it also penetrates to the core of my recurring theme over the past year of what it means to be 'Enjoying God.' Enjoying God obviously has a personal aspect (and that could be expressed like this, I love Jesus and I want to know more about Jesus). But It also has a wider corporate perspective and will be something we do as church; but it also always looks outwards and impacts the lives of others around us who can't help but to recognise that God is in our lives.

As I understand it - Enjoying God is always about these things, but it is always, always about authenticity.

The constant temptation, however, is to be an inflatable tank. To give the appearance of strength and power but actually to be empty and weak.

I believe this world; our society needs the salvation Jesus offers. Men and women need to see the reality of God in the life of the church. Many are asking questions about life and God. But I also believe they are not easily duped by showy inflatable tankesqe expressions of church. We need authenticity. A spirituality that speaks directly and powerfully.

We've just read from Psalm 63. It's one of passages where the emphasis is on the reality of meeting with God. I could call that Authenticity. Enjoying God might be another metaphor. It's interesting when we understand the background to these words as David originally expressed them. He's on the run. He's been forced to leave his palace. His son Absalom has gathered a group of rebels and they are chasing him down. It's a desperate escape into the wilds of the inhospitable desert. The perfect occasion when you might shout at God – why has this happened? Why must I go through this? The sort of thing many shouting at God at the moment?

However, if you note, the first word is not “why” but “You” (v1). He is not asking for his circumstances to be changed, but he is wanting to experience God in the middle of everything that is happening.

There are so many other aspects of this Psalm that can encourage us tonight. Verses 2-5 show David thinking back upon his life and his previous experience of God “I have seen you...” (v2) The particular thrust of this is that his past encounters with God have nourished him and given him confidence for the present.

That is further developed in verses 6-8, when he thinks of the particular difficulties he is now enduring - they actually cause him to focus his mind and trust God. Even though sleep escapes him, he has time to *remember* (v6), a song to sing (v7) and a friend to strengthen him (v8).

And finally in verses 9-11, he has a confident hope - what God has promised, the Lord will do. In verse 11, notice how for the first time he calls himself “the King” (it’s as if he suddenly has that realisation of who he is and God’s purposes upon his life – God is doing something in my life, “the King will rejoice in God”)

As I reflect on all this, I believe this authenticity speaks to people. Living out Psalm 63 is evangelistic. Living like this is a gospel apologetic. Our co-workers and neighbours cannot avoid this authenticity.

Such times as these encourage us to be reflective. What is God saying through all of this? How then should we live? I believe we need to live confidently knowing our days and our times are in the hands of a loving creator God, a God who has purpose and order. A God for whom no detail is insignificant, no one is forgotten nor overlooked.

What is God saying to the church today? What have I learned over the past 12 months as I have benefitted from a wider and personal insight into PCI? Actually one thing has been burned into my heart.

That is the utter urgency of evangelism. We can dress that up in fine sounding words and make it sound more clever and fit with our theological perspectives; even contemporary culture. But what we need are authentic thriving churches all enjoying God. All living confidently most especially when people in society are wavering and shaken.

Did you see the vlog by Russell Brand a couple of weeks back, commenting on why so many people are googling ‘prayer’? He noted that beforehand many felt they could find all the answers they needed in science, or social anthropology, only to realise now the deficiencies of these theories.

It’s a reminder that people are asking questions today in a way they have not needed to ask before. What we in PCI must ensure is that our attempt at answers do not involve us looking like inflatable tanks. If it was ever sufficient just to look the part, those days are long gone.

Our churches, we ourselves as believers, must embody confident authentic gospel living. Our churches must see themselves as mission stations and not safe bastions of orthodoxy. We need these churches in rural Ireland, in the suburbs and in the cities. They will all look different, they will express their witness in a multitude of ways, some of which might even cause us to take a second look and wonder what they are doing.

Even the early church did not convert the entire Roman world in a generation. But by the end of the 40 year period documented in the Book of Acts – they had scattered and settled everywhere and were authentically witnessing to Jesus. Enjoying God will mean being authentic and we must make evangelism our top priority.

Ends.

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