

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 made at the Opening Service of Worship at the 2021 General Assembly held this morning, Assembly Buildings, Belfast having been elected and appointed for a second historic term of office.

I would like to thank you for the trust you have placed in me to take up again these duties as Moderator. In saying that, I sincerely hope the extension of Moderatorial terms of service does not become habit forming. Thank you Dr Brown for your conduct of the business, and for our very long association which dates back to the earliest weeks of my Christian life which began 46 years ago in 1975. Some of you know that I came to faith in Christ in this very hall, although you might be comforted to know it was not while I was a member of the Assembly.

So let us take a few moments to wonder with God about what he might have us do and be, as we look to the future. Just over two weeks ago, I spoke with others at an event to note the first sitting of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1921. For eleven years, the home of the Parliament was our own Theological College here in Belfast, while Parliament Buildings on the Stormont estate was being constructed.

At the conference, I sought to reflect on the future of Ireland and its people, and I did so on the basis that we ought to be a people of hope rather than despair – the gospel surely demands this of us. So, here are a few words and phrases which I used at the conference while drawing some conclusions.

North, South, East and West on these islands present us with a web of opportunities to grow – economically, culturally and spiritually, if we have the vision for it. In a post-Brexit, Protocol environment some of this has been made more complicated, but if anything it has been made more urgent. We must work tirelessly to sort out the new configurations of our cultural, commercial and spiritual connections. No shortcuts. No quick fixes. No buck-passing. Just gritty determination to get it done.

Whatever a new Ireland resembles, it will not be because someone was victorious, while another was defeated. If it looks like that, it won't be a new Ireland. It will just be the same old, same old.

I hope we Presbyterians are not so stubborn that we would wish to exclude anyone; that we are respectful in face of difference; that we recognise the important benefits of a shared space, and that our vision for the future here, means that a Presbyterian can feel equally at home in the Gaeltacht, as they can in the Braid – and equally (with hope for the future) call both of them “home”.

When I made these and other remarks I did not want to minimize the challenges of speaking grace into some of the most contentious issues facing us in the public sphere for generations. Ethical issues surrounding our pastoral responses to human identity, sexuality and gender will be debated by us this week, and rightly so. The question of legacy and the need for justice for victims of the troubles is by their own admission the most complex matter facing legislators in the current round. Criminal prosecutions may not be feasible in the vast majority of cases, not because of a lack of political will, but because of the entirely appropriate high threshold of evidence and proof required, beyond reasonable doubt, to secure a criminal conviction. Does this leave victims without hope?

Perhaps some families might take comfort and even a degree of resolution in a separate process which offers, on the balance of probabilities, an outcome which while short of a criminal conviction, may nonetheless provide a degree of closure for them. As pastors and leaders of churches, this may be welcomed by many.

Relations on this island, north and south, and between Ireland and The United Kingdom have been strained during this year, for reasons which include Brexit, the Northern Ireland Protocol, and our various attempts to mark or note the centenaries, including the formation of a border on this island, thus shaping the United Kingdom in its current form, as well as the creation of a new state in the Irish Republic.

We understand the sensitivities surrounding these anniversaries, and had hoped that the gathering of heads of State, Heads of Government and local political leaders might have offered a significant public demonstration of a common commitment to peace, reconciliation and hope for the future. We remain resolute however, that these values will be to the fore in our engagement with governments.

Last year I said in this equivalent address, that the Presbyterian Church in Ireland is a pro-life church. It was a great disappointment to us that the Northern Ireland Secretary of State invoked a set of powers effectively bypassing the devolved institutions to impose upon Northern Ireland a deeply permissive abortion regime, far beyond any existing elsewhere in these islands. We remain committed to vocalizing our opposition to this, campaigning for changes to the law to protect the lives of unborn children who have no voice regarding their future.

Alongside this, it was with genuine concern that the Republic of Ireland Panel addressed a draft bill before the Oireachtas seeking to introduce legislation permitting assisted suicide in Ireland. As a result of many submissions made, including our own, the passage of the Bill has been halted, which is a victory of sorts. But we are aware that another Bill will come, and presumably also a parallel campaign will be launched in Northern Ireland to further challenge what we consider to be the specialness, the sanctity, the holiness of human life.

You may have gathered that my theme for the remaining months in office is Hope. The puritans who shaped the theology of the reformation were above all else, a people of hope. They believed in the power of the Gospel to transform society – and so they pushed the church out in mission. For them, the world was not a wreck from which people must be plucked, and from which they must withdraw, but was the property of Christ to be reclaimed for him, through the unstoppable power of the gospel. For them, the call to mission was a call to engage. They understood themselves not as separatists but as servants of a world in need.

Today, we find ourselves in a different kind of place than 17th century England. But the same gospel hopefulness inhabits and shapes our reformed vision of the world, and our belief that the task before us is unfinished, until Christ comes again, as he surely will. So we press on in hope.

I want to thank the Conveners and Secretaries of our seven Councils and two major Commissions which have worked through the year. The Reports we will debate the coming days represent not just a large volume of work, but their heartfelt desire to serve the cause of Christ, and we are in their debt.

Ends.

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