

5th June 2017

Address by the Very Reverend Dr. Frank Sellar, outgoing Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

Matthew 12: 22-24 and 31-32 and v 36-42

Even as we meet this evening a battle is raging.

In Mosel, Syrian government forces are fighting I.S. insurgents for the ancient city of Nineveh, the location of our Gospel Reading.

Last year during the week of General Assembly we considered the Old Testament Prophet Jonah: “The word of the Lord came to Jonah, son of Amatti, Go to the great city of Nineveh and preach against it, because its wickedness has come up before me.” But Jonah said ‘No’!

Instead of obeying the Word of the Lord, Jonah sought to determine his own destiny and that of others and fled in the opposite direction, but instead of man catching fish, a divinely appointed fish caught Jonah, and brought him back to a place of humility and repentance.

This evening we therefore top and tail this story by returning to Jonah, but this time not revisiting those hugely important matters pertaining to bigotry, selfishness, lack of care for God’s creation, and peoples’ eternal wellbeing, but we consider Jonah from the perspective of the New Testament and these words of Jesus.

“A wicked and adulterous generation ask for a miraculous sign but none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.”

Oddly enough Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet with whom Jesus directly compared Himself.

“The men of Nineveh will stand at the judgment, with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and now one greater than Jonah is here”.

The men of Nineveh, known for their extraordinary cruelty and barbarity; for impaling their enemies on spears and removing their skin will stand in judgment over this generation.

Why!

Because they were good?

Well clearly not.

But because when their sinfulness was pointed out to them through the proclamation of the Lord’s messenger Jonah, they repented. On hearing the Word of God articulated by one who had died and been raised, as it were, from the depths of a watery grave, they removed their clothes and put on sackcloth, turned in the opposite direction and started to do right.

Now that, said Jesus, was in marked contrast to the people of His generation who when He had healed a demon possessed man instead of embracing that beautiful act as good, the Pharisees had twisted it into something they said was evil.

The context in which we live and move and have our being is a postmodern world, which presents both fresh opportunities and demanding challenges for those who owe allegiance to Christ who is the Truth.

Many have commented that we now live in a post truth society. In-fact 'post truth' has been named the word of the year by the Oxford Dictionaries. It is defined as circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief, which is exactly what the Scottish philosopher, Alistair McIntyre, predicted as far back as 1981.

With the decline of Christendom, the Western world of which we are a part, finds itself with a moral dilemma. We cannot agree on what "the good" is. What good is for human beings. As a consequence, we are unable to persuade people by reasoned arguments because we cannot agree on what is good and reasonable. If we cannot persuade people, then only emotion remains, which is why discussions on politics and morality are increasingly loud and angry.

We have arrived at what McIntyre calls "Emotivism". The doctrine that all moral judgements are simply a matter of preference or feeling.

So where does this leave the Church? Five hundred years after the Reformation the Christian scene across Europe is one of ruins! Secularism is rising and Islam is rising. Christianity continues to decline. Has the light failed? Not in the least. Christianity is growing faster than any other religion around the world. So why is it dying in the West?

For the answer to that, we must turn back to this encounter of Jesus with the Pharisees. Why does Jesus so identify with the story of Jonah? Because it is a picture of what was about to take place.

They were going to be given a sign. A miraculous sign. Death and Resurrection. This is Jesus' way and it is God's way; for Jesus Christ makes big claims! At his trial he declared that one day all would see Him seated at the Throne of God. He was condemned to death and the charge was blasphemy. This man was claiming equality with God.

Our modern world claims equality with God. More, it claims to be even more important than God! Christians have this in common with Muslims: Together we reject that notion! In the face of secularism, Christians and Muslims both insist that God is more important than us! Where we disagree is on the questions 'Who is God'? and 'What is He like'? It is Christ Jesus who stands and proclaims: "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father".

But this is the same Jesus who insisted that the mark of His disciples is that they too adopt the way of Jonah. "If any would come after me, let them deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me". That is the way you will be my witnesses and your lives will be credible.

This is where we in the West have gone so badly wrong. We have abandoned the way of the cross and opted instead for power and respectability. We have blessed the ways of the world, and we have legitimised sectarianism and racist xenophobia and all in the name of God. Now we are being forced to the margins once more! It is no longer respectable to be a Christian.

In C.S. Lewis' book, "The Silver Chair", the Children and Puddleglum had been told to follow Aslan's signs. They didn't. They opted for a good time at the Giants' Castle. Almost too late they understood that they were part of the Menu! They fled, and tumbled down a black hole. Bruised and bleeding they realised they had been led to where they should have been. Once more they were following Aslan's signs.

As we look ahead in this generation we too have a choice. Keep going the way of secular Nineveh. Seek power, aim to be popular and accepted in a society that rejects Jesus. Or, we too can repent and turn back all the way to the only sign that has been given to us. The sign of Jonah. The cross of Christ.

This year it was my privilege to meet a senior indigenous Christian leaders in a nation where the persecution of believers is common place. I asked him how he felt about that and with a shrug of his shoulders he smiled and said “The Church must do what the church has to do.”

Christian people are called to live lives of honesty, openness and integrity. To live under the authority of God and His Word. To resist convoluted re-interpretations of right and wrong and conformity to the secular spirit of our age. We are not at liberty to create new truth, less to articulate or promulgate what are euphemistically called alternative facts.

At the start I said that even as we meet a battle is raging. But I wasn't referring to the one presently being fought on the planes of Nineveh, but the battle for the hearts and minds of women and men, boys and girls throughout this land, south and north.

“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign,” says Jesus. “But none will be given except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three night in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah and now one greater than Jonah is here.”

The church of Jesus Christ of which we by grace are privileged to be a part, is called to give a strong, clear, gracious and unambiguous exposition in our day to the One who *is* the Truth, and to live a Holy Spirit filled life with transparency, humility and joy, so that lost and seeking people throughout this fractured and needy world might find themselves complete in the Lord Jesus.

God says to us ‘Go!’ and we say.....?

Ends.

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