

5th June 2017

Address by the Right Reverend Dr. Noble McNeely, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, at his formal election and installation as Moderator at the Opening Meeting of the General Assembly this evening, Assembly Buildings, Belfast.

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." Luke 9:23.

Firstly I want to acknowledge the General Assembly's electing of me as Moderator for 2017-2018. It has been an overwhelming experience for Florence and me since becoming the designated moderator in February. We have been especially heartened by the numerous messages from PCI (Presbyterian Church in Ireland) members and people from various walks of life. We have been particularly humbled by the regular indication that people are praying for us and not only in Ireland but throughout the British Isles and overseas.

One reality of the responsibilities of the Moderator's year is the painful fact that we will not be as active in First Holywood Presbyterian Church and I won't be able to be engaged as normal in the pastoral capacity I enjoy and from which I receive much blessing. But I hope I can offer some of my pastoral gifts to the wider church as I meet with people and hear from a wide cross-section of church members about the concerns they suffer. And I trust that Stephen Lowry who is acting as Assistant to the Moderator and entering his fourth year with us in Holywood will get much encouragement from the congregation as he takes on added responsibility and duties.

I find it quite awesome to think that I am Moderator of the PCI in 2017, the year of the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Florence and I visited Wittenberg early April to have our own special celebration of Luther's posting of his 95 thesis to the door of the Castle Church thinking that I too may pin my humble thesis to the door in 2017. But I discovered the original door is not there, destroyed by fire so I didn't get making my mark on Luther's door. We did though get much satisfaction in visiting the special places associated with Luther's remarkable initiative that started the wheels of transformation in the church that has had such colossal influence for 5 centuries.

The PCI is celebrating the significance of the Reformation in September with three evenings in Dublin, Londonderry and Belfast, the theme being, 'Faith at the Crossroads'. I hope these events will allow us to celebrate imaginatively the influence of a movement that continues to affect the church today. I'm hoping during my year as Moderator to highlight some of the major principles of the Reformation and I trust that in my preaching throughout the PCI to proclaim clearly Luther's reformed doctrine that by grace we are justified through faith in Christ alone.

We also look forward to the special assembly in August at the Ulster University campus at Coleraine. The theme for this special symposium is 'Everyday Disciples' and I'm pleased to adopt this idea as the theme for the forthcoming year. I trust as I circulate in the PCI that I'll be able to promote this concept and challenge us regarding how we are following Jesus as everyday disciples.

The Bible reading was from Luke 9 where we read that Jesus said to his friends and followers, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Throughout the years when this text is read it implies that a follower of Christ, a believer justified through faith, is an everyday disciple.

The phrase that jumps out of the text for me is 'take up the cross daily and follow me.'

When Jesus spoke of the cross it was the most horrendous symbol of cruelty that one could imagine. The cross was the most threatening and despised Roman torture that was used to condition and control people. It was written in scripture, "cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree," this was applied to a wooden cross, it was a cursed cross.

No one wanted anything to do with a cross but Jesus used it as a sign of self denial and surrender and a symbol of obedience and service. To take up the cross means walking against the grain of cultural values, so that our own expectations and needs take a back seat to God's call.

Jesus had already alluded to what he would suffer – he was to be rejected by the elite, he was facing death, execution was imminent and amazingly on the third day resurrection was predicted.

Christ suffered the cross the very curse of the Roman crucifix, Christ the Son of God took His place freely upon that cursed cross, though guiltless he died the guilty man's death for our salvation.

It has been said the cross is the picture of violence, yet the key to peace,

A picture of suffering, yet the key to healing,

A picture of death, yet the key to life,

A picture of utter weakness, yet the key to power,

A picture of capital punishment, yet the key to mercy and forgiveness,

A picture of vicious hatred, yet the key to love,

A picture of supreme shame, yet the Christian's supreme boast. (David Watson)

By taking up the cross we are putting our trust in Jesus who died as our substitute and has set us free from the burden of sin. Without shame we boldly witness to His love and grace in our lives, committed to Christ as His disciples.

So we take up the cross daily as everyday disciples. The first disciples when they were called to take up the cross daily and follow Jesus entered into an unknown adventure through which they were constantly learning new things about Jesus and His mission. A disciple is literally a student who is constantly discovering and learning new things from his teacher.

If we are dedicated everyday disciples we will be constantly discovering and learning, will be regularly challenged and transformed, we will be having our minds and opinions tested and opposed, we will be constantly changed and enlightened by the counsel of the Holy Spirit. If we are living, as we should be, regularly in partnership with Christ we ought to be constantly reformed to the person of Christ.

I believe to be an everyday disciple is the most exciting and amazing vocation anyone can be engaged in. If it is not then we have to question the commitment we have made to Christ.

The PCI at our Assembly this week will be considering priorities in regard to the mission of the church. The Priorities Committee has stated that discipleship is about 'enabling church members to live as followers of Jesus in every relationship, everywhere they are and in every circumstance of life.' This is a profound statement.

A Christian follower of Jesus is in a profound relationship with Jesus. A relationship which has to mature if we are to sustain our everyday discipleship and this can only occur if we are prepared to sit with the teacher daily. This I believe means that faithfulness to prayer and Bible reading is imperative in our daily life.

I plan to provide a very humble little booklet of some devotional reading on the theme of the special assembly in August and have available during my year of Moderator. I have asked some people to contribute to this modest book and provide Bible reading, a prayer and a devotional thought on what it means for them to be an 'Everyday Disciple'. My hope is that it might influence those of us who have allowed the importance of meeting everyday with Jesus slip and decline.

One of the significant principles of the Reformation was the centrality of the scriptures. Emphasis was placed on the strategic place of the Bible in worship and the pedagogical importance of the sermon. Disciples in a relationship with Christ and His church ought to be committed to Sunday worship; I think many in our churches have to reconsider their loyalty to their church on Sundays and their recognition of God's word as being central to their lives.

The first followers of Jesus when they sat with Him and listened to his word, when they explored the countryside with him and journeyed through unfamiliar villages were constantly hearing about how they were to relate to strangers and challenging people. Christ taught how the disciples were to relate to people and communities. As the priority statement says we are to relate to people everywhere.

We live in a world where individualism prevails but Christ teaches us the value of community and how we are to treat our neighbours. As everyday disciples this is a constant challenge to us in our society; Christ tells His disciples they are to love their neighbours, even those who offend them and those who are strangers.

The Council for Public Affairs has been promoting a vision statement which includes we "believe that the Good News of Jesus Christ challenges and equips us to develop radically new attitudes and relationships with our neighbours throughout the whole of Ireland" and it continues "we affirm Christian peace building to be part of Christian discipleship and reassert the Church's calling to pursue a peaceful and just society in our day." We recognise as disciples the challenge of this in our day as our society continues to struggle with the past and current political issues.

We also remember how Jesus was prepared to sit with those who were strangers and it is heartening to hear about how the PCI is welcoming strangers to our shores. The International Meeting Point in South Belfast is where discipleship is being manifested through scores of volunteers welcoming people from various countries and meeting their practical and spiritual needs.

I speak to many of our church members and they freely tell of how they are finding it more difficult to share their Christian faith in their places of work, in the places they socialise, even for some they find greater family rejection. Being a disciple of Jesus in the modern world of today is growing more and more difficult and intimidating. When Jesus told His disciples to take up the cross, it was expected that there would be physical rejection. The persecution of Christians throughout the world is more evident than ever before. Recent media attention is highlighting what has often been a reality. Many Christians are suffering persecution, imprisonment and discrimination. Attention has recently been focusing on the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt where bombs and attacks have taken lives including children.

A Council for Global Mission task group has considered the persecuted church and how we can stand with those who suffer and quotes Hebrews 13:3 “Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.”

When Jesus called His disciples to be everyday followers he commissioned them in Matthew 10 to go to the towns and preach the message and evangelise. The task of evangelism has always been at the heart of my ministry and discipleship. People are more dismissive of our faith in the post-modern culture. I am convinced though that if we are disciples of Jesus we ought to be endeavouring to make other followers of Jesus – this is our mission!

Our churches use imaginative ways to reach people, some churches are focused and are trying new initiatives, but we ought not to be disillusioned because people are not going to come freely to our church, we have to meet the people where they are. My friend Rico Tice, an evangelist in the heart of the London West End has written the little book, ‘Honest Evangelism’, ‘How to talk about Jesus even when it is tough.’ He believes one of the most exciting developments in evangelism in the UK has been the increased emphasis on one to one evangelism and Bible reading.

This sounds intimidating and demanding but if we are disciples of Christ in the culture of today we have to create relationships with people and as Peter writes in 1 Peter 3:15, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.”

It seems to me that we ought to be raising up a generation of disciples who are equipped and prepared to tell the story and to share their faith and the good news in the public square, the place of work, the corridors of power, among media workers, on social media and in the places where culture is created. I believe this is what we can do during this year when we are promoting the theme, ‘Everyday Disciples.’

Maybe you have been listening to this address and being a disciple is not what you consider yourself to be. I remind you of the verse I referred to, Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny Himself and take up the cross daily and follow me.”

The Jesus who died for you and me, the sinless Jesus who took the judgment of our sins on Himself, died in our place on the cross, invites us to enter a relationship with Him, a relationship where we are forgiven and accepted as we are. He’s not asking us to justify ourselves, but to trust in Him alone, He opens the door to a new freedom and an indescribable journey with Him and you can enter this journey by a simple commitment to Christ. May we all know His grace and by faith rejoice in our journey of discipleship.

Ends.

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