

**Strictly embargoed 20:00hrs**

**Wednesday, 22 June 2022**

**Address by the Rt Rev Dr David Bruce, 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.**

*“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.” 1 Peter 1:6*

Tom Wright reflecting on his time as the Anglican Bishop of Durham ruefully commented: “Wherever St Paul went, there was a riot. Wherever I go, they serve tea.”

One of my predecessors on this platform used to say that Presbyterian Moderators eat their way around Ireland, so I stand before you as one, overfull with tea and tray bakes who is (frankly) relieved that it is coming to an end, for the sake of a stretched cassock. So plenty of tea – but what about riots? Well, we have had our moments.

My overwhelming emotion in stepping down is of gratitude to God and his people for these two years – albeit in a deeply turbulent period of our history. Much of my second year in office has been a time of readjustment for the church as we have gradually emerged from the pandemic. The seven Presbytery tours which I have undertaken across my time in office illustrate this welcome shift.

When visiting the Presbyteries of Down, Armagh, Derry & Donegal and Ballymena in my first year, most it was online. On the times when we could meet face-to-face, it was only with heavy restrictions in place. Our more recent visits to North Belfast, Coleraine & Limavady and to Iveagh included the more normal hectic schedules of meetings and services. These were the kind of tours which leave Moderators incapable of rational thought as they recover their energies in a darkened room. Zoë and I survived, thrilled to see the robust and strong work being done on the ground across the country in our churches. There is much to be thankful for.

On this occasion last October, I listed some of the major local and world events in the period of my first term in office. These included Brexit, Covid, centenaries, legacy of the past and much more besides. Of course we now add international outrage at the inexcusable invasion of Ukraine by Russia, the Platinum Jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen, Assembly elections here in Northern Ireland, the imposition of ever more radical social policies in both jurisdictions, Partygate, Beergate, Wordle and the gradual leaching of respect for people whose leadership ambitions are not matched by their depth of character.

Commending the teachings of Jesus Christ in face of such a conflicted public square has always been the Church's story. As the Apostle Peter put it, we are "strangers in the world". And really, our story is no more complicated, except in detail, than his was – and the promise that he offered those early believers in Jesus - that their inheritance could never perish, spoil or fade – is what will keep us going in the teeth of overt criticism. Peter writes to them, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials".

The New Testament commentariat increasingly agree that the opposition faced by Christians in Asia Minor in those early years, while in parts including the dreadful scenes of Nero's day where believers were tortured and executed, was usually a more subtle affair. Peter says their trials are of "many kinds". For some this meant being socially ostracized, such that faith in Jesus though not in itself declared illegal, became effectively so. Christopher Byrley writes of this period, "though no official laws were in force making Christian practice a criminal offense and Christians were not hunted down by any police force, Christianity was "effectively illegal."

Whispering campaigns, social isolation, trolls, bullies, blocked career paths, this is what it feels like to be persecuted, without necessarily being imprisoned or martyred. And yet, Peter writes to them, "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials".

How can you rejoice in such grief? Well, this is what disciples of Jesus Christ do. We know the end of the story from its beginning. This is a journey with a good destination, even if the road itself has its difficult sections. Grief and joy are travelling companions for disciples of Jesus – they each name junctions on the same road, and (in a curious way) they need each other if our discipleship is to be proved authentic. The Gospel does what Peter says it would do.

It injects joy into a season of grief. Crucifixion brings about Resurrection. Seeds thrown into the ground to die, burst into life and multiply. Darkness which crushingly envelops, is laughed at and dismissed by the tiniest pinprick of light. There is hope. This is what the gospel does for its day job, and we are gospel people.

We have found ourselves in recent times under harsh scrutiny as a people. Some have struggled to understand what we mean when we say we are a confessional church, with standards to which we physically subscribe as elders at the moment of our ordination. Our critics, alighting on a number of social policy issues such as the provision of abortion, end of life care, the redefinition of marriage, a changed understanding of human identity, among others consider our views to be incomprehensible, or even dangerous.

We are painted as rigid, unchanging and even unloving. We have been described as a people who exclude rather than include; as a church which judges sinners rather than offers grace; as a people who do not mean what we say when we advertise that “All are welcome”. A denomination which will be left behind on ‘the wrong side of history’. A few have left us while others have sought to change our minds from within. Some have adopted a position of overt opposition to us in the media.

We do of course need to listen carefully to those who criticise us. Like any human organisation which has been around for a while, we have our blind spots, prejudices and deficiencies – of course we do. This is one of the reasons why we meet in General Assembly, so that we can scrutinise our positions on various matters of policy, life and doctrine, and under God discern His mind, and hold each other to account.

But similarly, we need to be confident in the calling we have received to be the church of God, and especially when to do so means swimming against the tide. In particular, and for us with confessed standards which define us, we need to state with loving clarity to the world around us, that we are not minded to re-define our relationship with the Bible, which as our supreme standard we consider to be the word of God. We will not re-write it, re-edit it or re-frame it.

Rather we will give ourselves more assiduously to the task of mining its depths and listening to the voice of its author as he speaks through it with prophetic force to our time, even if it states truth which to contemporary wisdom appears unpalatable. The Bible is not a toxic text, but the word of life. We see it:

- as inspired, revealing God's heart and will;
- as authoritative, carrying his voice of encouragement, command and sometimes rebuke;
- as sufficient, because in its pages we know of Jesus whom he has sent for our salvation, and there is no other name given under heaven, through which we may be saved.

Similarly, we are not minded to adjust our relationship with our subordinate standards which this church has held since its formation.

It is under this generous canopy of truth where we as a community of grace confidently gather. There is room here, and we include all who wish to come, embraced by the forgiveness bought by Christ on our behalf – the ultimate act of generous inclusion before the human race. And we know when we come under this shelter, that he loves us and indeed loves us so much that he will not leave us as we are, but gradually, day by day through the determined work of His Spirit, lead us on a journey of dying to self and to sin, that we might be more and more conformed to his character.

This conversion (for that is what it is) from darkness to light, from brokenness to wholeness, from sin to forgiveness is what Paul meant by the offence of the cross. And yes, it is provocative, because it cuts through the pretence that all is well with us, just as it is healing because it offers us hope that all may be well with us. Of course the gospel is offensive! It says we are all dead in transgressions and sins. (Not that we are merely mistaken, or misguided, or confused, but spiritually dead, without hope and without God in the world.) But at the heart of its offensiveness is the beauty of its truth. You don't need to stay dead.

My prayer for us as I move on from this role, is anatomical.

That our voice when we speak would resonate with both truth and grace, setting aside vocabulary that cuts, and offering words of healing in Jesus Name. Such a voice will ask of contemporary Ireland, "How can I bless you?"

That our hands when they are put to work would be open and soft to welcome the stranger among us. Such hands will ask of contemporary Ireland, "How can I serve you?"

That our eyes when they see a new Irish person with different coloured skin, or our ears when they hear an accent from Cork or Coleraine, will be ready to celebrate the God-given diversity that is within the Body of Christ in this place. Such eyes and ears will say to contemporary Ireland, "In Christ, we are one."

That our hearts beating a little faster in our breasts would not be indifferent to the cause of the widow, the fatherless, the alien and the stranger. Such hearts will ask of contemporary Ireland, "How can I be as Jesus to you?"

That our feet, calloused and dirty from the journey would, because of these very signs of wear, be beautiful feet bringing good news to a world of awfulness. Such feet will say to contemporary Ireland, "Do you know Jesus?"

I do not know what the future of Ireland (North and South) will be, but I pray this – that those of us who live here bearing the name of Jesus, whether loved or despised, respected or reviled, would walk Peter’s mixed up journey of grief and rejoicing, knowing that Jesus has gone ahead of us and is even now cheering us on and waving us home. Keep going. Do not falter. Glory awaits!

Amen.