

## **General Assembly 2018: Sermon delivered in Sunday Worship by the Revd John Proctor Sunday 8 July 2018**

*This is the full text of Mr Proctor's sermon reflection as delivered to the communication teams prior to General Assembly. There were slight deviations from the given text when it was delivered.*

### **On Mark 6:1-13: Home and a Way**

There are two good ways to resist change in the church. One is the jaded way – to point out: We've done that before. The other is the bemused way: We've never done that before. They work equally well. Either suffices to defuse, deter and divert any thought of innovation.

Familiarity and fear. Fed up with what we've tried, fearful of what we haven't, we stay in our groove until it becomes a grave – a grave for optimism, for hope and for courage.

Perhaps it isn't at all like that where you come from. But there is a bit of that mood around in many a church. And it does have biblical precedence, starting at Nazareth, no less.

I wonder what kind of footprint Jesus left in Nazareth, what memories, impressions or emotions lingered after he set out on the road. The reflection Alison read a few minutes ago is one guess; but no amount of carbon dating is going to turn that piece of guesswork into knowledge. We have little to go on, apart from Jesus' occasional visit to his home village, to his sending church we might call it, for example in Mark chapter six.

And that day, as Jesus preached, somebody said to their neighbour, you know I pushed him in his pram. I taught him in primary school. He kicked a football through my kitchen window. He used to keep an eye on my sheep. Who does he think he is? Important? Not likely. He's just a local boy.

'He was amazed at their unbelief.' Familiarity. This is Nazareth. We've met that before. We can domesticate that challenge. If there's any novelty in Jesus, people like us have the background, the experience, the savvy, the history, not to take it too seriously. Give me back my groove.

The other half of the reading might play straight into the second way of resisting change: we've never done that before. He sent the twelve out, two by two. Several chapters earlier Jesus had called them to be with him and to be sent out. So perhaps some of them were tempted to think, Well, we're with him. We've done that bit, quite nicely. Do you think 50% is a pass mark? But now he sent them out, to make inroads of wholeness and hope into the realm of suffering and evil. They would not carry much with them. Sufficiency was ahead, not on board. And although fear is unstated in the text, I think I can smell it between the lines. Can we cope? Will it be difficult? We've never done that before.

Home and a way. The domestic, the familiar, the known, the groove – a groove so deep that we stop seeing over the top of it, to God's horizon. Or a way, a road, a journey, into something new – a journey that frightens, but a journey that actually offers much more by way of hope.

When I looked at the list of resolutions for General Assembly, I gave a little inward groan, I thought I saw Nazareth writ large. And I regarded with some horror the prospect of being asked, in a few days' time, what did you do at General Assembly? and having to reply that the main thing we did was talk about the future of General Assembly.

Sorting out General Assembly is important, but it also does have a rather domestic feel about it. Home based. The

start line of our service. Scarcely what we are in business for. God loves the URC, but God does not want us to be obsessed by the URC. And, if that is the main thing that absorbs us in these days, and the highlight to which we look back afterwards, Jesus may be amazed at our unbelief too, at our capacity to live in the groove.

But, as we have gone through Assembly, the groan has become quieter; there is much that has taken us outward ... Christian Aid works in about fifty countries, and the Council for World Mission in about forty. Amanda Khozi Mukwashi and Collin Cowan come with that perspective, to challenge us to learn from Christian experience in other lands, to commit afresh in partnership across a worldwide church, to believe that God wants to make a difference in places of need, and to be willing to work with God in that task.

The privilege and joy of sharing with our children and young people has reminded us that we can learn from those much younger than we are, and that we have a responsibility to them, to hand on a church that will be fit for purpose in the decades through which they live, that can prosper under their leadership, and become a gift to generations yet unborn.

Our interfaith spot, this afternoon, will invite us to think about Christian witness in a society that is more secular and more multi-faith than it used to be. Where might we build bridges and where can alliances be made; and what is the distinctive contribution that we can bring to the table in the name of Jesus?

And, business from the mission committee has spoken about the multi-cultural communities in which we live, about how this aspect of our society already helps us to grasp and embrace more of the gospel, and the call to all in this land to treat the newest and most vulnerable among us with humanity and justice.

Now I think that that set of calls and challenges might have more of the journey than of Nazareth about it. It might bring some fears, about whether we are equal to what God asks of us. But the sufficiency is ahead. Like a bicycle, we find our balance as we get moving.

Nazareth is a safe place. Jesus had to spend some time there. And so do we. But the way usually seems to lead outwards. There is work to do. There may be changes to embrace. We shall find ways of resisting it if we really want to. But when Jesus sends us, the best thing to do is to travel, in expectancy and confidence and hope. And it's to help each other to do that, and to help thousands of people in our churches to want to do that – that's why we come together at General Assembly. Thanks be to God.

The Revd John Proctor  
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