

General Assembly 2018: Address by Mr Derek Estill

Monday 9 July 2018

This is the full text of Mr Estill's address as delivered to the communication team prior to General Assembly. There were deviations from the given text when it was delivered.

I think we recognise that we as the United Reformed Church are going through a period of change and that we need to find ways of doing things differently. We need to recognise that we should positively embrace change to be able to respond to the new situation we find ourselves in, both locally and nationally. Very often we find we are working hard to reach out, using tried and tested ways of worship and working, which despite our best efforts seem to achieve less than we hoped they would.

The pictures that have accompanied us over these last four days have been an attempt to help us focus and think about the way ahead. Some of these are unclear showing uncertainty, challenge and a downright difficult way ahead.

However, today's image, I hope you agree, is more encouraging. With a glimpse of blue sky indicating that after all there is hope of a way forward, even though it is not entirely clear and not without continuing challenges.

These pictures have been made into a small booklet so that we can take them away with us to use, if we wish, to help us think about our own and our churches' next steps.

Nigel and I decided that it is very important for us to use the same theme of 'Walking the Way: Living the life of Jesus today' as our denominational emphasis and to develop the theme that Kevin and Alan had for their two years of service, so that we maintain continuity and focus.

As you may know, new materials are being produced to help us all to explore what it means to be disciples of Jesus in today's world here in the UK. These can be used for personal and/or group study.

We are aware at present that less people are identifying with the Christian Faith, particularly here in the UK and across western Europe. Increasingly the opinion is expressed that following the Christian faith is no longer a priority for people.

We are therefore facing real challenges to live out our faith in this increasingly secular and indifferent society. It makes it more difficult to engage with others to talk about our faith, about how important it is to us and why we know following Jesus is so important for us all.

In light of this, I thought that it would be good to have a look at what James says in 2:14-17 about faith and action. He writes:

My brothers and sisters what good is it for people to say that they have faith if their actions do not prove it. Can Faith save them? Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need cloths and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in saying to them God bless you, keep warm and eat well if you don't give them the necessities of life. So it is with faith if it is alone and includes no action, then it is dead.

It is important for us to understand that good works and actions come from having faith and not the other way around. That is why good works and actions, that are visible and tangible, are a very good indication to others of our faith.

This has echoes elsewhere in scripture, such as in the letter to Ephesians 2: 10, where Paul says:

God has made us what we are and in our union with Christ Jesus he has created us for a life of good deeds which he has already prepared for us.

Also yesterday's lectionary reading was Mark 6:6-13, which many of our congregations will have explored in worship and individually through the prayer handbook and which the Revd John Proctor preached on in our Sunday worship yesterday. This tells the story of Jesus being rejected in Nazareth and then sending out 12 disciples to the villages round about. He tells them to go and teach the people, to not take anything with them, and to move on if they are not welcome. We are told they went out in two chasing out demons and healing the sick – showing faith in action.

Oscar Romero, a Catholic Archbishop in El Salvador, wrote many daily meditations. He was very active in condemning and challenging the endemic corruption in the El Salvadorian community and highlighted the needs of the poor.

In one of his meditations about the spirituality of the church, he says:

The mission of the church is to awaken, like I am doing now, the spiritual meaning of life, the divine worth of human action. Don't lose this, dear brothers and sisters. That is what the Church offers to organisations, to politics, to industry, to commerce, to labourers and to women in the market. The Church brings this service of promoting spiritual dynamism to everyone.

In another of his meditations he wrote:

Brothers and Sisters, we don't measure the church by numbers of people, nor do we measure it by its material buildings. The church has built many temples, many seminaries and many other buildings. The material walls stay and become part of history. What matters are all of you, the men and women, the hearts, the grace of God giving truth and life of God. Don't measure worth by counting how many are in the crowd, count the sincerity of the heart with which they follow this truth and the grace of our divine saviour.

James says faith without action is dead.

Jesus sends out his disciples to do good works.

Oscar reminds us that the mission of the Church is to awaken the spiritual meaning of life. He reminds us not to measure worth by counting the numbers in the crowd, as what really matters are the hearts of all of us, men and women, and our sincerity in living out the way of truth and grace in Jesus.

Whilst on holiday I went to church, and the vicar, in the homily, told of a brother who did not get on well with his sister. They rarely saw or spoke to each other because he felt she was bossy and always interfering. When he became ill, his sister wanted to come to see him. However, he was anxious about this and began to set down boundaries to try and contain her approaches. A little later, when he began to think about why his sister might want to come and see him, he slowly realised that she was worried about him. As he began to see things from her point of view his anxiousness receded and they eventually became reconciled, becoming more at ease and understanding of each other.

This reminded me of how important it is, when we are considering approaches to other people, that we make sure we understand their point of view and not simply assume it is the same as ours.

Responding to need, in a faithful way, seems to me is at the core of our mission. Whilst we recognise that rules and procedures are very important, what is more important is to follow Jesus' example.

We remember, don't we, Jesus being criticised for healing on the Sabbath, for taking food from the Synagogue to feed his friends, and for allowing them to pick ears of corn on a Sabbath because they were hungry. Good practising Jews, the rules say, should not be doing these things on a Sabbath.

This reminds me of a true story that happened in Blackburn, which is where I go to church and am engaged in Interfaith work.

A Jewish friend of mine, who is now 94, when she was a little girl, like all grandchildren, loved to go and see her Grannie and Grandad. On a cold winter's Saturday afternoon, which of course is the Jewish Sabbath, she went to see them. When she got there, they were both asleep in front of an open fire, no central heating in those days, but unfortunately the fire was about to go out. The room was cold so Renee picked up a piece of coal from the coal scuttle next to the fire and put it on the fire to try and keep it going. At that very moment her grandad woke up, seeing her and realising what she had done, he immediately slapped her across her face remonstrating with her that putting coal on the fire as she had done was doing work, and that was not allowed on a Sabbath. She of course was responding to need, being worried that her grandparents might catch cold and that this would be very bad for them.

When Renee told me this story, it immediately struck me how similar this was to what Jesus had done because as good, faithful and compassionate Jews their first thought was to show love for those in need and is therefore a compelling example to others.

Looking back at what we have been thinking and talking about for the last four days. All the business we have transacted, so necessary for the well-ordered running of our church nationally and locally, and our work in response to the call of Jesus to love one another with refreshed emphasis on Discipleship, it seems right and proper that we give serious thought and encouragement to making sure our actions and our works are a tangible and visible sign of us living out our faith. We must make sure we have listened and understood the others point of view first, remembering that Jesus in addition to sending out the 12 disciples also sent out 72, and we too are in this line of disciples being sent out.

Whilst thinking about this I was reminded of John 21: 6 where Jesus says to his disciples after an unprofitable night of fishing 'cast your nets on the other side' and they immediately caught many fish.

Here it seems to me is an example of doing things differently in response to Jesus's teaching. They were using the same boat, the same nets, they were the same fishermen, and fishing in the same place, the big difference being, they were listening to and following Jesus instructions.

I remember Kevin using this passage to illustrate that very often we make all the excuses we can to explain why we have not been able to achieve what we set out to do, such as:

- our building is not suitable;
- we are not situated in the right place;
- we don't have the right people with the right skills to help us;
- we don't have the money;
- today's circumstances are working against us;
- etc, etc.

When in fact, all the time we have all the resources we truly need as God has already provided them. We are God's hands, feet and voices. We just need to listen to what God is asking us to do, to trust and have confidence in the example of Jesus, and the power of the Spirit.

It is clear that we are going through a period of change, and we need to do things differently.

The pictures on the screens we have been looking at have illustrated difficult journeys, with hope to come but with more to do.

James 2 points to the importance of us showing visible and tangible evidence of our faith.

Oscar reminds us that the Church brings the spiritual meaning of life to everyone, that we shouldn't measure worth by counting numbers but should look for the sincerity of the hearts within us showing the truth and grace of our dear saviour.

Bearing all that in mind, and realising how important it is to see things from other people's perspective, we can respond by sharing God's love to meet needs, trusting that all will come together as we deepen our discipleship by Walking the Way and living a life of Jesus in today's world.

Whilst thinking about all this I am reminded of an old hymn, which you may remember and which includes the following words:

When upon life's billows you are tempest tossed,
when you are discouraged thinking all is lost
count your blessings name them one by one
and it will surprise you what the Lord has done.

We need to heed James' words, about faith leading to action, whilst remembering Oscar's thoughts about not counting numbers and to recognise that what matters are you and me and the Grace of God giving truth and life. We should try doing things differently, putting ourselves in others' shoes to better understand their situation and the issues they may be facing, so we can share the authentic loving care that Jesus gives us and wants us to live out in response to his new commandment to love one another as he has loved us.

So, let us deepen our discipleship as we walk the way, living a life that Jesus would live today through our actions and good works and inspired by a deepened faith in Jesus Christ our master, mentor and saviour. We should count the many blessings we already have amongst us, and commit ourselves to love one another in the knowledge that God is the source of all hope, joy and peace.

As we go from this place let us be enthusiastic and committed to finding new ways of making a difference for Christ's sake as his disciples.

Let us be assured by the knowledge that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God surrounds, encourages and supports us in all we do and say, now and forever more as we express our faith in words and actions by joining in with what God is already doing wherever we are.

Amen