

General Assembly 2018: Outgoing Moderator's Reflection by the Revd Kevin Watson Friday 6 July 2018

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

Let's tell our stories like Canterbury Tales. Together as the People of the Way, we began our pilgrimage of grace in Southport, sustained by our chaplains Gwen and Mark offering us a prayer to set the pilgrims on the Way –

*Lord Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace
we are your people, People of the Way.
Light our path.
Show us your way clearly and compellingly.
Through complexity, diversity, dissent,
make your will known, make your will shown
in our lives and in our Church.
We give thanks for your call
which gave birth to our Church many years ago.
Help us now to hear Your call afresh.
Like a cool wind on a hot day, blow us out and about,
People of the Way,
healing, life-giving, wise and faith-full.
Amen.*

So, we journeyed – in Communion, together we had a look around Southport - from the sands at Formby where fossilised footprints of our prehistoric ancestor's echo through time, of a people searching for their place to belong, to be safe, to be home, until we came to the Kirby beach where today's statues reminded us of all the people today still longing to know who we are, and what is the purpose of Life. We had walked through Merseyside's history of local ferries (there is a story going around that the ferry crashed for the first time in its history, as I mentioned it from the pulpit) but also of global trade and shipping, of emigration and of slavery, world wars and mining. Since then, in the next two years we have, again and again, come across these themes: we are challenged by the Legacy of Slavery Hearings, which Alan has attended, and the horrendous reality of modern slavery; the remembrance of the First World War, and the upheaval of millions of people because of today's conflicts; forever reminded of the shifting and sinking sands of politics and economics. But in these last two years we have also celebrated the Reformation and its rediscovery of confidence in the Gospel, the launching of Walking the Way, with our own re-commitment to walk the Jesus Way of discipleship and to deepen our Faith. What was my role to be? Did I think my role was driver, to steer us forward – well, there were certainly moments of being in control ...

What have I learnt two years later as we reach Nottingham. How do I come before you today? My mother's maiden name was Hood, maybe ... for I come with a tale that the house where we live in Wrenthorpe, Yorkshire is built on the site of a Mediaeval farm, in a region called Loxley, with a record of a man born there called Robin of Loxley – I am sure the man was born in our back garden! Yet here we are, come to Nottingham, in the very county that tells the story of Robin Hood as theirs! The stories we tell! We all have our stories – truth and history, myth and legend!

My own story? Well, I was the boy who could read maps before he could books, who knew the capitals of the world before letters of the alphabet. Now this may be true or maybe it has become a family myth. I certainly love geography and history, so may I show you my first bible – this is a modern copy of a book I fell in love with, a simple

format – each page showing the same scene as it moves through history, a settlement becoming a village, a town, a huge city.

(Editor's note: The book referred to is A Street through time: A 12,000-year journey along the same street. Illustrated by Steve Noon and written by Dr Anne Millard.)

I can remember, as a youngster, recognising the place of worship there on every page, in each age, at the heart of community. Of course, it is a building and as I grew up I would learn it is also about the presence of God's people at the heart of community. It is a city, though I knew then it is also about village because I was brought up in the country, and it is a beautiful city, but I was brought up in the backstreets of a colliery village. When I was a child we'd never had it so good, but the narrative of my village was one of oppression and class struggle, of lock outs and strikes, of soup kitchens and of poverty. I know the thin places where we meet God are in the places of vulnerability and poverty; brokenness and need – they have to be, all places have to be, if we believe in the incarnate God. And for two years I have visited many thin places.

It may be myth or it may be history, but the story is told, and becomes so precious that it is passed from generation to generation. I say this, because that's what I have experienced for two years, my role has been to listen – hearing the story of our churches and communities, institutions and of our own denomination. And these stories have taken me to the very heart of what it is to be URC – call of elders as local spiritual leaders, the deployment of ministers into local pastoral relationship, the mission focus of our denomination is church focussed, CRCW ministry – even calling our national strategy 'walking the way' recognises the space where you are, is the shape of your feet.

I do believe that, four years ago, when I shouted to God 'what message do I need to give?', I heard God say, 'Come back to my Son.' Of course, it is the evangelical cry to call people to Jesus – let us never lose our Missional challenge. But also in our churches, I have met amazing Christians doing amazing things for Jesus. As the People of the Way promised I would, I have met the People of the Way, healing, life-giving, wise and faith-full. They certainly need our appreciation and our thanks, our hope and our encouragement. For the People of the Way, despite walking the Way, are feeling dismay and discouraged, under pressure to keep the local church going, or synod structures going or even our denomination going. Who has started these stories of lack of ministers, lack of money, lack of adequate buildings? The facts and figures may be true, some are myths, but none of them are the story we share. Sadly, many now describe us and even define us by these stories of gloom and death.

But here is the Truth – the privilege to be moderator has revived my confidence in the Gospel, and deepened my faith in God, marking out Christianity – the people I have met, the People of the Way – from every other religion, philosophy or political system. We have been reminded of this through our Bible studies and sermons in Mission Councils, as we worked through the letters of the early church. Paul wrote to the Colossians:

"Watch out for people who try to dazzle you with big words and intellectual double-talk. They want to drag you off into endless arguments that never amount to anything. They spread their ideas through the empty traditions of human beings and the empty superstitions of spirit beings. But that's not the way of Christ. Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything." (Colossians 2:8-10, from *The Message*.)

Here is pleroma – the fullness of God in all God has made – from God putting God-image in each of us, God becoming part of this creation as Jesus, God being with us in the Holy Spirit.

Friends – I'll let you into a secret – that I think you already know - I have met God all over the place, and God is alive and well in the body of Christ, United Reformed Church, you and me, and indeed in all of God's universe. *(At this point Assembly broke into spontaneous applause!)* Now I know what 'Come back to my Son' can mean, what it really

means. In Christ we have the fullness of God – life in all its fullness! Now I know why I was to challenge us all to be generous of Spirit – because we have so much to give – not poverty but plenitude!

Lynne and I went into Wakefield one Sunday morning, because we are from mining families, we went to see mining and community banners to be paraded through the city for the first time in 30 years. But just to watch! When someone pushed this placard into my hand.



'In the midst of plenty we will not suffer want!' Here was something I could affirm – so off we set to join the march. We found ourselves behind protesters fighting to save Huddersfield hospital, and behind us were artists proclaiming free expression for artists around the world. Yes, we were marching with people of different political views, different theologies, and a diversity of humanity – all drawn together with a story to tell and a hope to change the world. I was proud to be marching; united with others as a people of humanity; marching with hope. The words on my banner come from 1931, from marches against unemployment and poverty. But we have a plenitude more abundant still! Why didn't we have a closed-down shop offering breakfast and prayer for the Sunday shoppers, or a pop-up church on the route of the march? Where were our churches on the march with good news to proclaim? Why did we not join the platform party and show solidarity with humanity?

The journey goes on from page to page, from age to age and like the seven-year old boy I still believe the Church is at the heart of Life, as it changes with every new baby born into this world, and every new Christian born again. Jesus is still waiting at the door, calling us to follow him into our communities, God's world. I wanted one photo to embody one of the so many churches who have heard the call, and being transformed and seeing the transforming power of Jesus. I have chosen a very simple act – and it is simply this – a church in Peterborough, which has moved out of its Victorian buildings, found a new way to be church and here is a simple act of generosity – joining Muslims to give away free bottles of water in the town centre. And they'll know we are Christians by our love.



Freely you have received, freely give. The journey goes on to be the People of God – we are moving. But where will it lead then listen as Derek and Nigel invite us to Walk the Way together with God's Son leading us.

*Kevin Watson
6 July 2018*