

Moderator's Address to the Church/Nation

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What a year to be installed as Moderator of the General Assembly - when there is no General Assembly!

What a year to be Moderator - when all the shops are shut. You try going online and searching under 'menswear' for lace, frills and silk stockings!

So yes, what a year to be Moderator!

I'm being light-hearted, of course, but let no-one seek to diminish the level of suffering that many have, and are, enduring right now. Every statistic speaks of struggle and tragedy and loss.

Let me assure the nation that the Church of Scotland, with our partner churches, will continue to pray for and support those who are most acutely affected. And the same commitment I make to those who, seventy-five years after VE Day, find themselves on this new frontline. We value you deeply.

All of that and yet here I am, installed now as Moderator. Here I am in this wonderful old hall - the very walls of which tell a thousand stories of those who have gone before. Here I am, simply offering myself in service to my Loving Father and His Church.

Yes, in this year.

Who knows; perhaps it was intended for 'such a time as this?' I'm trusting it to be so.

I'm here today with six months of planning behind me and yet with nothing before me. Six months of meetings and briefings and reading and prayer and preparation to arrange this year - and yet an empty diary. So much for planning!

There's a verse in the book of Proverbs which can be read, 'We may make our plans but God has the last word.' Boy, was that ever true! So much for plans.

Perhaps as never before we've come to understand the meaning of the word 'provisional.' Does it take a ground-breaking, global crisis such as the this one to bring home to us that

we humans are vulnerable, 'frail as summer flowers' - perhaps not so much 'in charge' as we'd imagined?

Many across the Church have seen their plans reduced to no more than debris at the bottom of the shredder.

COVID, you have achieved in a few months what this wonderful old, perhaps somewhat tired, institution has been struggling to do for years - that which no amount of radical planning was likely to achieve. Our Assembly has been cancelled for the first time since 1689! - and you've created something of a blank slate for the Moderator!

But much more importantly, for the Church as a whole - yes even in the midst of all THIS - you are causing us to look again at what really matters and at the possibilities that lie before us.

Is that what happens when our well-rehearsed plans are ripped out of our hands?

Regarding my own situation, many folks have said to me, 'We're so sorry it's worked out like this, in your year.' I appreciate the kindness - and yes there are disappointments. Then again, it's 'life.' It comes at you. Not all of it you'd choose. Sometimes it sucks.

But let me say this: it sucks a whole lot more for those at the bottom of the pile - those who need to bear the humiliation of food banks and soup kitchens and those around the world for whom food banks and soup kitchens are but the stuff of dreams. And those who struggle with poor mental health. And those who live in fear of the raised fist because the pressure of confinement got too much.

For some, this is much more than inconvenience and disrupted plans.

So yes, much has changed, much is horribly uncertain.

And yet much remains.

Primarily, our Lord, who is the same yesterday, today and forever. The apostle James assures us, 'He never changes or casts a shifting shadow.'

For my own part, I signed up to serve this 'same as always God,' so nothing has changed. The circumstances have. What my year as Moderator is going to involve has. Yes, but the call to serve is as it was.

And I hear it today, loudly and clearly.

I'll never be far from the path if serving remains central.

Now if that is true for me then equally so, it's true for the Church - the whole of it. We find ourselves in uncharted territory, having to re-imagine church. Even as recently as a few months ago, none of us could have envisaged that a day was coming when gathering in our buildings would not be an option and may not be for some time to come.

As someone who is first and foremost a parish minister, I know first-hand how difficult it is not to be able to meet. Some - particularly the digitally-excluded - are experiencing the closure of church buildings as bereavement.

But buildings or otherwise, we're still called to serve. That's a fixed point. Nothing changed. We may not have a blueprint, but this calling has always been about a willingness to venture beyond the familiar and comfortable.

Jesus didn't give much away when he called those four fishermen. He called them and He sent them. No terms and conditions. No detailed plan, radical or otherwise. Just 'come to me' then 'go for me.'

Like the ebbing and flowing of the tides.

The next time you find yourself saying 'these are unprecedented times,' stop and think about those first disciples. You don't think Jesus was calling them to set down everything that was familiar and to step into that 'uncharted territory?' Even when later and back at the fishing, they had to learn what it was to 'cast their nets on the other side.'

And so it still is - He calls us to him and sends us out for Him - asking only that we trust Him. I call on the Church to be ready to cast its net on the other side. And maybe in that to give up our life that we might gain it.

Many of us are naturally anxious. Ian White's song, 'Though I feel afraid' speaks to our situation:

'All I know is You have called me,
And that I will follow is all I can say.
I will go where you will send me,

And Your fire lights my way.'

He calls. He sends. He lights the way - now, as for those Jesus first called.

But none of this we're called to do on our own and so now we should be re-affirming our togetherness. Ed Sheeran has a song, 'You need me, I don't need you.' COVID lesson number one? You do! We all need each other.

That's true for the Church and for the whole of any society.

None of us is self-sufficient, so let it be that we realise and acknowledge and rejoice in our inter-dependence. The surgeon at the hospital is nothing without the cleaner. The supermarket bosses are nothing without those who re-stack the shelves and operate the check-outs.

What we have most assuredly learned in these days - though we should have known it all along - is that we are entirely dependent on one another.

And might it also be that we begin to sense more, or recover a sense, of our dependence on God himself?

- who still causes the sun to rise each morning
- who long before we realised how much we needed ventilators was putting breath in our lungs
- who protects our very souls with iron-clad PPE

I mentioned earlier the verse from Proverbs, 'We may make our plans but God has the last word.'

The question is: 'What is God's last Word?'

The same as it always is. The same reassuring, unchanging word. The Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The most important word of all: Love.

Though every circumstance change, God's love remains. And from love flows peace. 'The storms of life may come and go but the peace of God you will know.'

Today I speak that truth to the Church, to the nation and to the far corners of the world.

The grace and love and peace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.