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Moderator's address to the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church, Southport, 1978

## **This is our Life**

'I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.' (Romans 1:16).

At the opening of our Assembly I want to direct your minds to the Gospel, for it is by the Gospel and for the Gospel that we exist as a Church. It is because there is a Gospel, because there is good news, that we exist as a Church, and we exist as a Church in order to live by that Gospel, to proclaim it, to glory in it.

Why is it necessary to say these obvious things? It is necessary because it is the obvious that is constantly forgotten. Those who do not believe in the Gospel — and they are the vast majority — see the Church as an organisation which belongs to the well-known category of 'good causes'. They see it getting larger or smaller. They discuss its successes or failures. They suggest that if something or other is not done it will dwindle and disappear. They ask whether one should be optimistic or pessimistic about its prospects. From their point of view these are natural questions, and they are not necessarily unfriendly.

But from the point of view of a believer in the Gospel they are meaningless chatter. If Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, all this talk has as much and as little importance as the twittering of sparrows. I do not find anywhere in the New Testament any traces of anxiety about whether the Church is large or small, successful or unsuccessful, popular or unpopular. I find only anxiety about whether this or that community of believers is living in faithfulness to the Gospel or not. There is no hint of anxiety about the final outcome. How could there be? Christ has met and mastered all conceivable powers that threaten man. He reigns victoriously. He will come in glory as the Lord of the new creation. All this is sure, and to be anxious about it would be as absurd as to be anxious about whether the sun will rise tomorrow. No! The Apostle's anxiety, if anxiety there be, is directed to a different question: Are you — my brothers and sisters who have been called to be stewards of this Gospel, living by its light? Living as those whose faces are set towards that new dawn? Or are you still trying to live in the old world, or live in both together — trying to look both back and forward, trying to serve both mammon and God? These are the questions that have real meaning; the others are — in the context of faith — meaningless

and irrelevant. The Church does not live by watching the public opinion polls: we live by believing the Gospel, and to live by the Gospel delivers us from every other anxiety.

Professor Herbert Farmer, to whom many of us here owe so much, suggests in a sermon on this text that perhaps these words are Paul's own answer to an anxiety which he does not confess. He had preached the Gospel to Jews and Greeks; he knew how it looked to them — scandalous blasphemy to the Jew, meaningless nonsense to the Greek. Now he is facing Rome. How would this strange story of a crucified Jew sound in the metropolis of the civilised world, among the merchants and the senators who occupied the seats of power in Rome? Farmer pictures Paul hesitating for a moment and then making this great affirmation: 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel. It is no weak or contemptible thing. It is the power of God for salvation — to all who believe.' You remember that mocking picture found among the graffiti on the Palatine — a picture of a man worshipping the figure of a crucified ass, with the text scrawled below 'Anexamenos worships his God'. That easy mockery of the Gospel story may well have been the background of this word of Paul.

In our long-Christian culture we are liable to meet a somewhat different perplexity. 'What do you mean by the Gospel?' I have been asked, not by pagans but by Christian theologians. The question has been asked as though the word 'Gospel' had ceased to have any assignable meaning. The other day in a group of ministers (not of the URC!) I heard the Gospel defined as loving God as your neighbour. But that is not the Gospel — it is the law, the law which does not liberate but enslaves. We have no need to tell people that they ought to love one another. They know that they ought, and that they don't — and that knowledge drives them either to despair, or to become themselves preachers of the law to others. It is fatally easy for the Church to become a preacher of the law — to tell society how it ought to behave, and call it 'prophetic speaking'. We may be called to do this on occasion, but only if we are first of all doing that for which we exist.

We exist, the Church exists, because there is a Gospel, good news which cannot be discovered but can only be told. The good news is that in the incarnation and death and resurrection of Jesus all the powers that enslave and dehumanise us have been disarmed, that the world has been set on a new course, that it is now possible to live a life which is not bound by the past but liberated for the future, and that the love which is the life of the whole universe is available as a gift for us all to share.

We do not discover this. We do not work it out for ourselves. It is not a 'world view' which we labour to create. It is the truth that lays hold on when we are brought into the household of faith, into the community that celebrates this faith in unbroken succession from the first apostles. It is the faith by which the Church has always lived, constantly renewed in each new generation and in every new nation and culture, yet always the same in its central affirmation - that Christ died according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he rose again, that he reigns and that he will come at the end to consummate the new creation. This Gospel is the thing with which we are entrusted. We exist as a Church simply because we have been entrusted with this Gospel. It does not depend on us; we depend on it. We exist as a Church because God in his strange wisdom has called us to be the bearers of this Gospel. He might have chosen other people. He could obviously have chosen better, wiser, braver people. He has chosen us. We are bearers of a treasure which does not belong to us but with which we have been entrusted. And the one thing which we have a right and duty to offer to our world, to our time, to our generation, is this Gospel. We are not called or authorised or equipped to tell other people what they ought to do. We are called, authorised and equipped to offer them the gift which will liberate them and enable them to do what they ought to do. In concrete terms, we are called, authorised and equipped to invite people to do that U-turn which the Gospel calls conversion, to turn round, look in the

opposite direction to that in which they are accustomed to look for help, to look at this Gospel — and to believe.

Of course, it is always possible, always easy, to disbelieve. There has never been any question about that. If you are convinced that life is a battle for justice, then this story is a scandal — for it turns upon a total defeat for justice. If you know from other sources (as apparently some theologians know) exactly what the word 'God' means — then it is nonsense to talk about this man Jesus being God. If you have decided that what is true must be what can be found in the general religious experience of the human race, then you will reject the idea that truth was in action at one particular point in the whole story. It has always been clear from the beginning that to believe this story could only mean a total conversion, a radical about-turn, a new beginning from a new starting-point. It is totally impossible to fit the story of a crucified and risen Lord into any view of the world except one of which it is the starting-point. From any other point of view it is either scandalous or meaningless, as Paul well knew.

Are we, then, called to preach something irrational or meaningless? By no means. With the apostle, and with the whole Church, we affirm a Gospel which is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith. Accept that starting-point, make that U-turn, allow this story to shape the way you think and act, and you find that, so far from being irrational or meaningless, it is the way in which life begins to have meaning and to make sense. We live in a supermarket culture where every faith and philosophy by which people have tried to make sense of their lives is on offer. We can go along the shelves and take our choice. Our grandparents lived in a world where table d'hote was the only diet available, but we live in a cafeteria. We can pick up what we like at the self-service counter. We have to pay at the end. I suppose most of us have looked at most of the concoctions displayed, and perhaps tasted a few. I confess that at the end of the line I find no way of making sense of the whole of experience, no model by which to grasp the whole of what it means to be human, which can compare with what is given us in the Gospel. Here alone, in the living, dying and rising again of Jesus, is the place where the full depths of the human situation are faced and dealt with. Here evil in all its hideous strength is met and mastered. Here the light of a new dawn breaks into the world. From this point one can set out in faith and love and hope — faith in what has been done once for all, hope which is sure and patient because Jesus is risen from the dead, and love which never fails because in Jesus love has overcome everything that stands against it. We make no irrational claim when we say — with the centuries of Christian history behind us — that this strange Gospel which is so offensive to the self-sufficient reason, is nevertheless the starting-point of a more profound and all-embracing rationality than anything that is possible from any other starting-point.

Every attempt to make sense of experience as a whole begins with an act of faith — a decision about what is the evidence which will be allowed to count, about the direction in which we will look for clues. We cannot look in all directions at the same time. We may begin, as a Buddhist, with the universal fact of suffering. We may begin — with the Hinduism of the Vedanta—with the mystical experience. We may begin, like the idealistic philosophers, with 'being in itself', or some such concept. Each begins with a decision which is taken in faith. The Christian begins with the story about Jesus. That also is an act of faith. Paul says that to all who have faith, who make the decision to turn in this direction, this story is the power of God for salvation.

What does Paul mean by the word 'salvation'? That great biblical word has been impoverished in our Western Protestant tradition. From African Christians we are beginning to learn, what we ought never to have forgotten, that salvation in the Bible is not something which separates us from others into a private and other-worldly heaven, but the fulfilment of God's ancient plan for the blessing of his whole creation, our whole common life in and with the world we share, our ancestors who perhaps never

heard the Gospel, and the generations yet unborn. Salvation means making whole. We are being saved, in a biblical sense, when we have been caught up into and have become part of God's healing work for the whole of his family and the whole of his world — the created world which he gave us to husband and which we have so ruthlessly raped. The Gospel, says Paul, is — for everyone who has faith — the power of God for that saving, healing work. And our preaching of the Gospel is credible when the Church is recognisably part of that healing work — not living for itself, not chiefly interested in Church growth, but on the contrary — forgetting itself in the service of the healing of all humankind, wholly given up to God's ancient purpose of blessing for the whole human family. It is when the Church — and I mean here the local congregation that meets every Sunday around the Word and Sacraments of the Gospel — is thus seen to exist as the sign of God's blessing for the whole neighbourhood, that people begin to ask about the secret behind it, the strange Gospel which we celebrate and preach.

But — and this is the main point I want to make — it is the Gospel, and not anything else, which is the essential thing that we have to offer to our communities. Obviously in all our service of our neighbours we work along with others who do not share our faith. That goes without saying. But we have a very special contribution to bring. It is not a particular set of plans for solving this or that problem. It is not even our devotion and enthusiasm. It is certainly not our thunderous denunciations of other people's sins — especially the sins that do not tempt our middle-class congregations. It is not — to use traditional language — the law, even in its most refined forms; it is the Gospel. It is the good news that there is an already accomplished liberation which we can announce, which we can communicate because we are liberated, and which we invite all people to celebrate with us.

Let me illustrate by looking at two issues which face us today as a nation. Take first the question of immigration. It is relatively easy for us to denounce the National Front; the people who make up our membership are not tempted to join the National Front. There is a much more insidious form of racism which almost certainly does tempt us, because it is embodied in the unanimous report of a Parliamentary Select Committee and because it is quietly assumed in the public debate which is now going on — namely the unexamined assumption that immigration is a threat, or rather that the presence of coloured people is a threat to our society. That assumption certainly is one that can be found among our members. And, of course, it is natural. Human beings are always tempted in times of uncertainty to seek salvation by clinging to their kith and kin. This is natural — and also fatal. It is the refusal of what God offers us in Christ. It is the refusal of a new family which Christ has given us. It is a turning back from the Spirit to the flesh. For a Christian it is apostasy. For our nation it is the refusal of the blessed opportunity which God in his mercy is giving us for the rejuvenation of our tired, sick society, a chance for us to begin our convalescence from the sickness that has always overtaken imperial powers when they have tried to abandon the enterprise of swallowing the world.

Yes, this clinging to kith and kin is natural. But we have a supernatural Gospel. We have been set free from the anxieties that make us cling to the past. We have been re-born into a new family which Christ is drawing to himself from every nation and race and culture. We are free to rejoice in the new gifts that men and women and children of other races bring us. That freedom, that eager looking forward to a new and richer future for the human family, that is the contribution we bring to this discussion. Or that we should bring. But why, I ask, are there only white faces in this Assembly? I have met many fine black people in the congregations I have visited. I don't think any of us who have mixed with black Christian friends would dare to say that the spiritual gifts they bring are inferior to those of white Christians. May I dare to hope that this will be the last monochrome Assembly of the URC? To hope that, from now on, our Assemblies will begin to reflect something of the richness of our society?

Take, second, the struggle for a more just society. We are still a very unequal society. The vastly greater part of our national wealth is still in the hands of a tiny minority. In spite of the affluence of the

past 30 years there are still areas of deep poverty — even if we leave out of account the vast poverty of the third world upon which we depend for our wealth. We do, however, live in a society where power is more widely distributed. More and more groups, including many of the highest paid, are discovering that they can use their strength to extort from the community what they consider to be their rights. All affirm that they are seeking justice, and each claims to be judge in his own cause. A point can come when the majority feel that they face a choice between anarchy and the alternative which its proponents will call 'firm government' and its victims will call 'tyranny'. When that moment comes, the majority will choose the latter. A society can only be both free and just if there is a sufficient number of its people who are willing to put the rights of others before their own, who have recognised and been liberated from that fundamental form of human bondage which makes me see my neighbours rights as a threat to my own.

Christians will fight alongside of others for a society which is both free and just. But the distinctive contribution which they will bring to this battle is surely this: that their rights have already been fully taken care of. They have been justified by grace. Justice is something which they have already received as a free gift. They are, therefore, content with whatever position in the pecking order God may assign to them. They are set free to be the agents of justice for others, and no longer need to be judges in their own cause. What I am saying may be dismissed as simplistic. Again I plead that it is the simple things which can be overlooked. It is a very rare thing to find anywhere in human history or geography a society which is both free and just. It is not a normal feature of the human scene. Christian history does show us, and we may thank God for it, some societies which show some approximation to that description. There can be no approximation except in a society which is leavened by people who have received as a gift, and can already celebrate in their liturgy and exemplify in their public life, the freedom of those who have been justified by grace. That is the one distinctive gift that Christians have to bring.

May I illustrate my point from another matter which we shall be discussing in this Assembly — the matter of unity among Christians. If we are concerned about Christian unity, it is for the sake of the Gospel that we are concerned. It is no accident that the modern ecumenical movement was born out of the modern missionary movement. It is in places like India that the divisions among Christians become intolerable, because they confuse the message of the Gospel with the vested interests of a clutter of ecclesiastical bodies whose existence arises from events in the long past. Of course, our denominational traditions are precious to us who have been formed and nurtured by them. But there comes a moment when we have to choose between cherishing the separate treasures we have inherited from the past, and letting them go for the sake of a Gospel which is greater than they are. The surrender of our separate existence for the sake of the Gospel is just what makes the coming together of Christians a source of new strength. I hope that, from our experience of unity, we can communicate that testimony to those who cling so fearfully to the traditions of the past.

Am I unfair if I suggest that the churches in this country today give an impression of timidity? They like to keep low profile. And, after the ecclesiastical triumphalism of the past, it is good that we should be humble about the Church. But there is no ground for timidity about the Gospel. A friend of mine, till recently a dedicated worker for the Communist Party, has several times said in my hearing: 'You Christians are the only people who have anything worthwhile to say; why are you not saying it?' Why indeed? As you have done me the honour of electing me to preside at this Assembly I have felt that this was the word I wanted to say to you at the beginning of our meeting. 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.' Ours is a small Church. Many of our congregations are very small indeed. That is perhaps our great asset. I mean that with all seriousness. We may perhaps be delivered from the last traces of ecclesiastical triumphalism and learn afresh the truth that where even two or three are gathered in the name of Christ, there is he — the Lord of the

Universe and the one Saviour of the world. If we will say what we have to say, and live as those who believe it, we shall find again that it is indeed the power of God for the healing of his whole creation.