

## **The Reverend John McCleery BA STM**

### **Memorial Service**

*An address delivered on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1969 by The Right Rev. William McMillan MA (Moderator of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland) in the First Presbyterian Church (Non-Subscribing) Dunmurry.*

\*\*\*

A memorial service for the Reverend John McCleery was held in the First Presbyterian Church (Non-Subscribing), Dunmurry on Sunday afternoon, 30<sup>th</sup> November. A very large and representative congregation drawn from many parts of the Province filled the Meeting House to capacity. Ministers of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland processed into the Church. Those taking part in the service were Rev, R.J.H Williamson, Moderator of the Presbytery of Antrim; Mr H.R. Hicks; Church Secretary, Rev W.C Lynas, Minister of the Presbyterian Church, Dunmurry, N. Novesy, Church Treasurer; and the Right Rev. William McMillan M.A., Moderator of the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland. The Moderator delivered the following address:

We are met in this historic Meeting House, where for centuries courageous men, fearing God and nought else, have ministered, to pay our tribute to one who was a worthy successor of that noble line of faithful pastors, of one of whom it could be said, in words taken from the Acts of the Apostles "This man was instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in spirit he spoke and taught diligently the things concerning Jesus...for he was a good man, full of Holy Spirit and of faith."

There are great and solemn occasions in human life when words seem altogether inadequate to express what the heart feels. This is such an occasion; for beneath its solemnity there is a sense of common loss which words of tribute and admiration cannot possibly eradicate.

It would be unnatural if this service was not tinged with sadness; was not overcast by an aching, and in some instances, an almost unbearable sense of personal loss and grief; for each of us this afternoon has his or her memories – precious, treasured, abiding – memories of one who lives among us now only in our thoughts and in our hearts. Yet could this possibly be regarded as a worthy Memorial Service for the Rev. John McCleery if the predominant emotions were grief, sorrow, sadness?

Surely not! If it were so, what then has been the abiding effect of his faithful ministry, his fearless preaching of the Gospel, his devout, expectant faith; a faith which was expressed not in words only, but in deeds; a faith which was expressed to the full in his own life, which is after all the best picture book of anyone's creed?

No; we offer him scant honour if our service fails to echo something of the triumphant, free faith of that courageous and happy soul which is now with Gog. We offer him a feeble memorial if the predominant emotion is not first and foremost one of profound gratitude and thanksgiving to God our Heavenly Father, for the life of

‘His faithful servant who fought the good fight, who finished the course, who kept the faith.’

I therefore commend to you words which he himself commended on numerous occasions to others, words which sound not of sorrow or grief, of despair or defeat, but words of thanksgiving and victorious faith – ‘Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.’ That is the phrase which ends, as with a burst of triumph, the Apostle Paul’s sermon on death and immortality. Of course it requires faith, firm faith to attune an occasion like this to words of thanks or victory, and yet I suggest that such a display of faith would of itself be a fitting memorial to John McCleery. Let us therefore, aye, even in the face of our personal grief and our common sense of loss, inwardly repeat – O death, where is thy sitting?, O grave, where is thy victory?, - until faith grows strong again, and we are thankful to God who hath given us the victory.

In any event, who of us knew him best could fail to give thanks to God at the remembrance of him? His was a great soul. A soul naturally Christian. A soul which knew no barriers and acknowledged none. He made himself at home with men and women of every class, creed and race. Indeed it was his innate kindness, compassion and understanding, that made his influence so memorable, and enabled him so quickly too attune himself to and influence any group of people with whom he came in touch.

Pre-eminently warm-hearted and sympathetic, his sparkling sense of humour and generosity of spirit brought joy with him into every household and any company. Tension could not exist long in his presence even when he himself was being most determined. His hospitality knew no limits. The little plaque which hung just inside the Glebe doorway expressed vividly the welcome that all were to find - through this door none can come too early, nor depart too late – and early and late men and women of all creeds, and of none, came to seek advice from, or ask the assistance of, or simply chat to, one who had become acknowledged as a true and trusty friend.

Wherever there was a need and John McCleery’s eyes saw it, his heart could not rest, until something was done to relieve it. This village of Dunmurry is not alone in lasting memorials to his foresight and magnanimity. It would be impossible to enumerate all the committees, groups or associations which treasured his advice and gained his active and unstinted support.

Young at heart himself he took a keen interest in everything that pertained to the welfare of the young. The scouts and cubs had always a special place in his heart, but the old were never forgotten and the distressed and sad were always sure of sympathy and understanding.

Tertullian, the early Christian Father rejoicingly exclaimed, ‘O testimonium animae naturaliter Christianae!’ – ‘O testimony of the soul by nature Christian.’ Today there are many who remember with thanksgiving and praise, lasting testimonies of John McCleery’s naturally Christian soul.

This old Meeting House will forever be associated with the name of Henry Montgomery and his fearless stand in the cause of civil and religious liberty John McCleery was a worthy successor to 'the lion of Dunmurry.' He shared the great Remonstrant's views on Christian liberty, and it was the earnest endeavour of his ministerial life to extend and perpetuate them. When ordained in 1934, he declared, "The principle of religious freedom." He also shared Montgomery's love of Presbyterianism and was unflinching in his support of it as our traditional and inherited form of Church Government, worthy to guard, what for him was the essential principle which alone made Christian liberty positive and not negative, namely the principle of Non-Subscription to human creeds and confessions of faith as necessary terms of Christian communion and fellowship. He was proud of his Non-subscribing Presbyterianism. In religion he was a liberal, without apology, without misgiving, without regret, and unrepentant liberal, who if he looked back at all, did so only to dream of a return to the Presbyterianism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, described by Montgomery "as an amidst a recognised variety of creeds, there was perfect unity of Spirit; for everyman, whilst rejoicing in his own liberty, respected the rights of his brother."

To some of his fellow-liberals such a dream was idealistic, conservative, futile; to those who did not share his liberalism, such a dream was reactionary, radical, dangerous. Yet he clung to it all his life, because he was a disciple of One who Himself was regarded as a reactionary; a disciple of the One Lord and Master of us all, whatever our name of sign, Who holds aloft the noblest ideal that mankind has ever known.

Yet misunderstood though he often was, no one doubted that his was a great soul, a soul happy in the friendship of man Churchmen whatever their doctrinal emphasis. He could have said, in the words of Lavainia, in Androcles and the Lion, 'religion is such a great thing, that whenever I meet really religious people we are friend at once, no matter what name us and moves us.' If he detested anything, it was humbug, hypocrisy, sectarian bigotry and party rancour. Extremes of every kind he rejected.

Christianity, related to the argumentative and controversial, in our thinking, he ignored. He identified 'the faith once delivered to the Saints', not with doctrines and dogmas however vulnerable, but with the things Christ taught and the principles Christ advocated.

In one of his broadcast sermons in 1948 he boldly proclaimed: - "There is no Christianity in any Church, no matter what it is; there is no Christianity in any institution, no matter what that Institution stands for, unless the principles and the moral values which Christ taught are practiced in that Church, that life, that institution."

Here again he was at one with his noble predecessor, and as was said of Montgomery so it can be said of him: "He made no display of religion, and seemed to shrink from anything like an exhibition of piety, but he cherished Christianity in his heart, and clung to it as God's Truth, and if at any time an illiberal expression

dropped from his lips it sprang from a jealous desire to guard the religion of Christ against insidious attacks. "Yes, at the heart of his life and [reaching was a robust faith. To be with him was to be conscious of it; to hear him preach was to be convinced of it. Every member of our small denomination has good reason to be thankful for his unswerving witness to the 'Liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free.'

Today there is often confusion and uncertainty as to the role of ministry and the Church. John McCleery had no such doubts. He inherited his love of the Church and Ministry from his father who served our Raloo congregation and from his uncle the Reverend James McCleery, who gave devoted service to English congregations within the Baptist communion.

His own call to the ministry came early in life, though for a time he had considered entering the medical profession. Following education at Larne Grammar School, the Royal Belfast Academical Institution and his graduation at Queens University, he began theological studies at the Assembly's College, Belfast. These were continued at Manchester College, Oxford and finally at Meadville Theological College, Chicago. It was at Chicago in June 1934 that he submitted a thesis on 'The function of the Ministry in the modern world.' This won for him the degree of Master of Theological Science.

In this scholarly work he analysed the necessary prerequisites of a minister of religion and set out ideals which he faithfully and assiduously of the Minister he argued, was basically two-fold that of Prophet and Priest. The Divine Imperative laid upon a Minister was 'to acquaint man at first hand with deity,' but he maintained this could only be done when the Minister himself 'knew God Whose ambassador he was, other than by hearsay.'

He further recognised that a faithful minister has other responsibilities; he had to be a leader, and example, a scholar, and administrator, a teacher; but above all he had to be a friend. " The relationship between pastor and people he wrote, 'must never be that of platform speaker to an audience; rather it was to be that of a friend to a company of friends.' So he exalted the advice of Ralph Waldo Emerson to his Divinity Students; When you meet with people 'be to them a divine man, be to them thought and virtue. Let their timid aspirations find in you a friend. Let their doubts know that you have wondered. Discharge to them the priestly office, and absent or present, you shall be followed by their love as by an angel.'

Such then were the aspirations which laid hold of the young, final year theological student, the student had no doubts or misgivings about the nature of his calling. He knew what was demanded of him. 'The ministerial function,' he wrote, 'is unquestionably enormous and full of difficulties such as would daunt the courage of the bravest men. Nevertheless courage must not fail. It is tragic when courage fails and the desire for comfort enters, as a motive, into the heart of a minister. That desire for intellectual comfort, after all the highest truth we know is not the kind that is comfortable and has nothing to oppose it. But to follow the truth; find it in the teeth

of opposition and hold to it even when appearances are against it, this is the great outstanding quality in the long history of ministerial service.'

Within a few months of writing those words John McCleery was licensed to preach the Gospel, and on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1934, was ordained and installed by the Bangor Presbytery to the charge of Newry and Warrenpoint. The testimony of many today, not only within those congregations, but within the communities in which they exist, is that he consciously practiced the ideals which inspired his youthful enthusiasm and remained for the last time to his friends in Newry. In his sermon he maintained: 'It costs a lot to live above the average; it involves a great deal of courage. No one need ever expect to be remembered with thanksgiving unless he is prepared to live above the average.' These words referred to members of a family with whom he had maintained ties of deep friendship, and though he would not have said so himself they were autobiographical, for he lived above the average. He practiced that he preached, indeed courage was the keynote of many of his most rousing sermons and a favourite phrase of his was "always go in at the deep end." It was not surprising, therefore, that with courageous determination he tackled, in the name of Him Whose ambassador he was, many a task which others would have considered too demanding or futile.

At the height of the war he accepted a call to this congregation. His first sermon was preached to a small handful of men and women following a night of terror when Belfast suffered its most horrible blitz. The theme of that sermon – BE OF GOOD COURAGE – has been recalled in many of the hundreds of letters, which followed the news of his death, letters which themselves are glowing testimonies of his amazing magnetism which not only made but kept friends. Indeed it is not too much to say that it was his courageous determination which rebuilt this congregation from a small number of families to more than three hundred; which caused him, despite ill-health, to add to this charge that of Crumlin and later, Moira, when it seemed that without ministerial leadership those historic Meeting Houses would become relics of the past. As it is they are still very much alive today, active, living testimonies of John McCleery's stamina and faith. Oh yes, the strains of thankful praise and grateful memories flow not alone from members of his congregation. Indeed they rise from every part of our denomination which quickly recognised his ability and loyalty. Within five years of his ordination he was appointed Moderator of the Remonstrant Synod of Ulster and three years later, at the height of the war, he was elected to the highest office in the Church. The youngest Moderator in the history of the denomination refused to allow the anxieties and tragedies of the war to blind him to the Church's mission. One can almost hear him as he addressed the opening session of Synod in those dark days: - "We must keep up morale. From the high vantage point of our historic and traditional position we must, in days when men's minds are groping, and men's hearts are agonising, find the courage and intelligence to hold aloft the torch of truth. The truth revealed in Jesus. The truth which is greater than any creed of religion, of race or Nationalism. We must speak with assurance of faith. Faith in Goodness and Human worth. Faith which respects the individual conscience. We have as a Church to keep the fires of universal brotherhood burning today. We have to preach and practise forgiveness and forbearance. We must not

forsake the precept 'love your enemies' in this war... we must also voice the sentiments of constructive peace and prepare for the task of post-war construction, not by accepting some politicians new order. There will be no new order unless there is a new community unless we men and women who have more of the spirit of Christ within them ... The Church then must keep vocal that still small voice, in which after the storm, and fire and earthquake the Eternal God speaks to His children."

Throughout his ministry John McCleery was earnestly intent in keeping vocal that still small voice of God. His sermons were always clarion calls to the Household of Faith that its members should live out their lives in service and sacrifice, and thus strive to be more worthy of the name, disciples of Jesus Christ. He himself set a noble example; but then he himself had laid down a charter for ministerial service in the closing words of that thesis from which I have already quoted. A charter which he upheld, right to the very end of his life: - "The ministry is worth living for and it is also worth dying for in the sense that one performing such a function can be utterly consumed in service. Let the minister be willing to see his life consumed in this way, cheerfully, valiantly, skilfully and creatively; let him put all his intelligence into that self-consumption, all his courage, all his wisdom... There will be no misery in such a ministerial service, and by giving ones life to humanity one is securely anchored to the rock of immortality. He shares in the triumph of the greatest of ministers, Jesus of Nazareth, whose life no man took from Him, but Who laid it down Himself – He gave it away."

Those words paint a cameo of John McCleery, which many will long treasure: The good man, 'full of faith' in whose ministerial service there was certainly no such thing as misery; the cheerful man who 'spoke and taught diligently the things concerning Jesus' and who for His Master's sake gave his own life away in the service of his fellowmen; the courageous man, convinced that life was a great adventure in the art of noble living, convinced that all engaged in such an adventure were securely anchored on the Rock of Immortality.

Let our last thought then be one of triumph and thanksgiving, I know of no better way in which to sum up his attitude towards death than in these words which he often quoted, words of Victor Hugo: -

"When I go down to the grave, I can say like many others, I have finished my days work, but I cannot say I have finished my life. My days work will begin again next morning. The tomb is not a blind alleyway, it is thoroughfare: it closes on the twilight, it opens on the dawn."

John McCleery's life has opened on the dawn, a dawn the like of which neither you nor I have ever seen. Thanks be to God who hath given him that victory and thanks be to God who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

*30<sup>th</sup> November 1969  
Very Rev. William McMillan MBE  
First Dunmurry NS Presbyterian Church*