

It is a very unusual part of such a service as this in our tradition when the minister who is about to be installed is given the opportunity to give a Statement of their Principles and Objects. Of course, there are particular historical reasons for this being part of the occasion but tempted though I am I will avoid looking at those. I will also try and avoid what is an inevitable tendency to give too much of an autobiographical account of one's own personal experience. But I will take my cue instead from 1 Peter ch.3 v.15:

*Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an account of the hope that is in you*

Some account of the hope that is in you seems a very appropriate purpose to such an address and my starting point is the Psalms. They are such a repository of wisdom and encompass the whole range of human engagement with the divine. I asked for Psalm 121 to be read because it is one of my favourites, because it not only emphasises the dependability and close presence of God in our lives it also roots this divine experience in the natural world around us.

*I lift up my eyes to the hills.*

*From whence does my help come?*

*My help comes from the LORD,*

*who made heaven and earth.*

Having lived in Belfast for so long it is a passage that comes to mind when you look out at the view of this city ringed with hills. Having worked in Downpatrick for so many years too it was a constant reality almost wherever you were, when you looked out towards the Mourne. And here in Dunmurry it is a constant part of our worship, the opening verses being inscribed in the beautiful Tiffany window that shows the path down the mountain to this church.

The Psalm reminds us of our place and God's place in creation. The hills represent the dependability of the earth and the wonder of creation. In the seventeenth century Thomas Traherne wrote:

*Your enjoyment of the world is never right till every morning you awake in heaven; see yourself in your Father's Palace; and look upon the skies, the earth, and the air as Celestial Joys...*

*Till your spirit filleth the whole world, and the stars are your jewels; till you are as familiar with the ways of God in all Ages as with your walk and table; till you are acquainted with that shady nothing out of which the world was made...till you delight in God for bring good to all, you never enjoy the world.*

And, of course, with that, as human beings we have a special place in the world and a special duty to preserve and not despoil creation.

Our recognition of our place in the depth and reality of creation points us to the need for faith. It is faith that guides us through the morass of choices, through the challenges of all times and through all the ups and downs of life. Faith is something which we hold as individuals and which we share as part of the Christian community, faith is something dynamic, it is an adventure of the spirit. It involves exploration and trust.

I think it is most neatly encompassed by those words of the Prophet Micah:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good;*

*And what does the Lord require of you*

*But to do justice, and to love kindness,*

*And to walk humbly with your God.*

It is faith that makes all the difference in the world. Thomas Merton, the twentieth-century contemplative writer said:

*Ultimately faith is the only key to the universe and for living.*

*The final meaning of human existence, and the answers to the questions on which all our happiness depends cannot be found in any other way.*

*To live a life without faith is to live without any connection to the deeper spiritual nature of reality, to be cut off from our heritage as children of God. It is to live to ourselves and for ourselves without reference to anything beyond us.*

The other side of the coin is that while nothing is possible without faith so everything is possible with faith. John Wesley said: *Faith laughs at impossibility; and cries it shall be done.* In its own way this is an echo of words of Jesus...*even if you say to this mountain, 'be taken up and cast into the sea, ' it will be done.* Faith can move mountains, those who possess

faith are given the courage and strength to face all kinds of obstacles. Indeed those who have faith are often specifically called to do such things.

But in our particular tradition we have two pillars to our approach. One is faith and the other is reason. This goes back to the very foundation of our denomination. In 1719 John Abernethy described 'Reason' as 'our greatest excellency'. Reason, he said was a God-given faculty; human beings were intelligent creatures which were required by God to employ their understanding. To do anything less was not to serve God properly.

The centuries that have passed since have underscored the need for this approach. As human knowledge has grown so our appreciation of the Bible, of human nature, of society and of the natural world have also grown. It would be a poor thing if we did not examine our religion with our reason just as we do all other aspects of human endeavour. Without faith we miss being inspired by and guided by a power greater than our own. Without reason we have no safeguard against delusion and no protection against extremism.

In the end faith is a journey, often something that is demanding but certainly not something that is static. Early Christians were often referred to as people of the Way and so it has always been. Faith is not something fixed in one point of time, a matter of a sudden conversion, and once and for all change, but rather a process, a journey, a constant seeking and asking.

But faith also is rooted in action and brings with it too responsibilities. When we look at the teachings of Jesus, when we focus on his life and example, we see a plan for life that is both straightforward and radical, that is both simple and extremely demanding. It is a high calling but is very clearly laid out. As we heard before:

*...love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the selfish.*

*Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.*

*"Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven;*

*give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back."*