Mormons Sunday 13 March, 2016

I’m delighted to be with you – here in Dundee in the home of Jackie now celebrated as a musical – in this event in which you mark International Women’s Day. I’m also mindful of the 20th Anniversary of the tragedy at Dunblane. Like you, I have been watching the parents of the children who died – parents both male and female – speaking with great depth of feeling but with calm and measured words about the unimaginable pain of the losses which they suffered on that day twenty years ago.

As I watched them, I related what I was seeing to my own experience of supporting and pastoring people who were living through great tragedy. In my experience it was in the difficult years in Northern Ireland. I asked myself the question, ‘Were these people always like that – in their depth of compassion and their inner strength?’ or did they become like that as they struggled to find ways of living the next day and the one after that.

And the answer surely has to be a bit of both. The most important struggle is that of overcoming anger and the desire to blame. Many people have remarked on the fact that the parents hardly mention Thomas Morrison. And it has been for others to criticise some of what happened that day – in particular the unconscionably long time it took before the parents were told which children had survived and which had not. The parents seem to have learned how to let go of all that – knowing that if they do not it will destroy them from the inside.

That of course brings us back to the people of the Bible who were spiritually strong – and many of them were women. This is Passion Sunday in our Calendar – the day on which as we approach Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Good Friday we contemplate the meaning of the suffering and death of Christ. I always think about the sadness of Peter who went out and wept bitterly after he realised that he had denied Jesus three times. And when Jesus hangs on the cross, the men have ‘all forsook him and fled’ and Mary his mother and Mary Magdalene are left silently watching and waiting as Jesus comes to his end. There is a deep inner strength in that kind of constancy – the same inner strength as is seen in many other women in the Bible. I’m thinking of Abraham’s wife, Sarah, of Samuel’s mother, Hannah, of John the Baptist’s mother, Elizabeth. Of course I think of Mary who responded to the angel by saying, ‘I am the Lord’s servant – may it be to me as you have said.’

What I want to do now is to go on and talk about two aspects of my experience where it seems to me that women tend to offer particular strengths which are not always present in men.

Many of our clergy are women – and in the best of them and in some men as well – you can see an instinct to work in collaborative ways which work well in the life of the church. They also seem to have the ability to listen and to speak about the deepest things in a way which maybe comes more easily to many women than to some men.

I’ve already mentioned my time in Northern Ireland. I grew up there and I served in ministry there for 29 years before I moved to Scotland. Most of that time I spent in deeply troubled places – places where the conflict was being experienced at its sharpest. In those places, I found that the people who most often had moral courage were women – the people who could envision a future in ways which might transcend the conflict were women – the people who could think prayerfully and in ways which deeply connected their faith to their lived experience were women. Those women did not openly confront or embarrass the men in their families. They kept their counsel for a long time and they worked steadily to change attitudes at the deepest level. It is no accident that two of the most transformative Presidents in Ireland were women, Mary Robinson and Mary McAleese.

I also want to mention my experience of India and the role of women there. There are two strands to that – one is the growing women’s movement which has arisen in the aftermath of the Delhi rapes. It’s a movement which seeks to bring to the surface the hidden story of the abuse of women and young girls in a society which had decided to be indifferent to that. The second story is that of how women seem to me to hold the future in a country like India as they did in Ireland. I’ve been there four times to Kolkata – formerly Calcutta – where we have a companionship link with the Diocese of Calcutta. It’s a society which runs in very traditional ways. The men are very much in control – in the church as elsewhere. But change is coming. As happened in Ireland, the coming of prosperity will bring a rapid secularisation which will sweep away that patriarchy. It is clear that the women are the people who are ready and prepared for that remarkable change when it comes. So I know well people like Moumita Biswas of the All-India Council of Women who ran a seminar for us on gender issues during our last visit just before Christmas. I’m also thinking of women like Caroline and Rupa – who are the Principals of large church schools – women of great ability and depth of character. And I think too of a group of sixth form girls whom we met. They said to me quite simply, ‘We shall fix India in our generation. We shall fix it first with education and then with prosperity.

This is all about faith. It’s about the way in which we all faith to root in our lives at the deepest level – not as a token thing or as another expression of our identity as it was so often in the sectarianism of Ireland. It’s about the way in which faith moulds character and creates that deep well of compassion, the passion for justice and the capacity for generosity to the point of sacrifice which is what really changes the world. And it changes the world because it is exactly the mark of the presence of the living Christ himself.