

**“Testifying Amid Tumult”, a sermon based on Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19 preached at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 13 November 2016 by Kerry Enright.**

I had known him for thirty years. He had been my minister and I had heard many of his sermons. And now, he was near death. I was to take his funeral. We needed to talk. I flew to his city. I sat beside his bed; he was propped up in bed. We had limited time. We talked. Tumult removes irrelevancies. Tumult takes us to the essence. He said, Kerry my faith has had its ups and downs, and now I am left with two things, Jesus and love. All else has fallen away. I prayed, he prayed, and in the prayer I heard him as never before - the fire, the intensity, the piety, the depth. They remain with me. In the tumult of dying, he testified to me of enduring faith. I wear his alb.

In the tumult of the week just gone, a President who had been maligned, his birthplace questioned, rose above the inclination to begrudge. He hosted as graciously as he could his belittling successor. He testified to more.

Amid the terrible tumult of apartheid, people testified to the dignity of every human being, and when apartheid ended refused retribution. Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu.

Amid the terrible tumult of war, people testify to the image of God in every human being, offering care and comfort, in Aleppo, Mosul, Juba, Malakal.

Amid the terrible tumult of poverty, people testify to the worth of every human being, providing clean water, good sanitation, economic development.

Scott Anderson was a minister of the Presbyterian Church (USA) serving in a Wisconsin congregation. His grandparents were evangelists in churches that emphasised testimony, people sharing their faith publicly. His parents though, wanted a more subdued faith more intellectual, so they joined a Presbyterian Church. So Scott became a Presbyterian. And the Church affirmed his call to ministry. He served his congregation until some of his parishioners outed him as gay. The tumult was such he resigned. He gave up what he said was the passion of his life, proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. He was inclined to follow his parents, to be more quiet, more subdued. But he rediscovered the tradition of his grandparents. So for the next twenty years, thoughtfully, carefully, politely, winsomely, he testified to what he believed the Bible taught, what he believed Jesus wants, what he believed to be the will of God, until the Presbyterian Church agreed to ordain and induct people in same gender relationships, and he was able to serve as a minister again.

“Ultimately,” said Scott Anderson, “testimony is not the story of our feeble efforts to overcome impossible circumstances. It is the narrative of God’s work.”

This week four of our members are commissioners in the General Assembly here in Dunedin .... We pray for them, not that they will say what we want them to say, because they do not represent us, but that they will testify to what they believe is God's call to the church, to what they believe to be the way of Jesus Christ for the church.

Other people are helping ... We pray for them all this week.

The tumult can arise because what we value is dismissed, what we hope for is frustrated, what we long for is belittled.

Jesus said it was going to be worse than that.

"... they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over, you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name."

"This will give you an opportunity to testify."

Testify to the truth as you see it. Witness as best you can. Proclaim Christ from your experience of him, from your praying and reading of the Bible and living in community and study of the tradition.

People can contradict your perspective. But testify, point to the truth.

Jesus did not promise testifying would persuade people: "You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; you will be hated because of my name."

"But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls."

It is one thing to read and hear those words. It is another thing entirely to experience them. Endurance is hard to endure! Ask Martin Luther King.

The poet W B Yeats has a word: As things fall apart and the threat of anarchy is loosed upon the world, he wrote, it's not hard to see how the best have lacked conviction leaving the worst, full of passionate intensity, to take the field. We must hope and go on hoping, work and go on working, for a better world. And, we might add, for a better church.

Isaiah imagines a future where animals will dwell in peace. Perhaps in the tradition of Animal Farm we need to see the animals as human beings dwelling in peace.

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,  
 the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
 but the serpent--its food shall be dust!  
 They shall not hurt or destroy  
 on all my holy mountain,  
 says the LORD.

The theologian John Howard Yoder said the church needs "a minority perspective." A majority perspective assumes that by power, wealth, organising or hard work we can get things to turn out the way we want. A minority perspective never makes those assumptions. A minority church seeks to embody and bear witness to the way of Jesus, without embracing worldly power or wealth or influence. A minority church uses imagination. A minority church learns to survive over the long haul.

Yoder said, "In Christendom, both optimism and despair are correlated with the direct reading of how it is going for us in the rising and falling of power structures." But the minority community learns to hope even when things seem to be going badly—"not only because we have heard promises 'from beyond the system,' but also because we have learned that sometimes our pessimistic readings of the present are shadowed too much by taking some setback too seriously."

During the Cultural Revolution in China, all religion was banned. Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, Christianity, Hinduism.

Believers were persecuted. Mosques and temples and churches became warehouses or factories.

When above ground was taken away, when the form of the church was banished, the spirit of the church endured, the spirit of people's faith persisted.

As people visited each other's homes to study the Bible together, to pray together, to explore together how to follow Jesus.

In their homes, faith was embedded in the everyday.

In China, for the period of the cultural revolution, 1966 to 1980, above ground faith stopped but underground faith flourished so when the cultural revolution ended, religion re-emerged with fresh vigour.

It is no less true for us here as it is for the Church in China.

What keeps us alive is not the form but the spirit.

What produces vigour is not the organisation but the embodiment in our being.

That's what our giving programme is about – the visiting, the conversing, the praying.

Beneath the surface, in our hearts, in our consciences, in our conversations, in our homes and places of work, in our praying, in our connecting faith with our everyday.

We journey inward, deeper and deeper, and we journey outward, further and further.

One fires the other, one animates the other, one extends the other, deeper in and further out.

The above ground work will end, said Jesus. There will not be a stone left on the other. All the beauty, all the gifts, all the temples will fade and fall, will be thrown down.

What endures is the life and way of Jesus Christ.

What endures is the living faith, in the spirit, in the people, abiding.

What endures is the presence of Christ, the presence of Christ in us, among us, and our life in the presence of Christ.

Abiding, enduring, testifying.

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**Knox Church**  
 449 George Street  
 Dunedin  
 New Zealand  
 Ph. (03) 477 0229  
[www.knoxchurch.net](http://www.knoxchurch.net)

Kerry Enright: 027 467 5542, [minister@knoxchurch.net](mailto:minister@knoxchurch.net)