

Moderation In All Things

Mark 12:38-44

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

4th July 2010

Tell me something. Do you think that being a Christian, or even being a Presbyterian, has benefitted you over the years? Do you think that you are better health-wise and that you have lived longer, or will live longer, because of your faith and because of the denomination to which you belong?

These may sound like strange questions but a recent study in England has found that those who belong to the Methodist denomination are in better mental and physical health – and live much longer – than the general population. Researchers have found that Methodist men live to the ripe old age of 83.9 compared to the national average of 77. And some are living much, much longer. Stanley Lucas, for instance, who died in Cornwall at the end of June, had reached the age of 110, having become not only the oldest Methodist but the oldest man in Europe. Methodist women, too, are not to be denied the benefits of their faith. They enjoy even greater longevity than men, living to 91.1 on average, 9 years longer than that enjoyed by other women.

The trend would also seem to affect Methodist ministers who live to 83.4 on average compared to 77 for ministers of other denominations. That's amazing, isn't it? Maybe I should switch denominations and become a Methodist minister. On second thoughts, in Canada, that would mean I would have to become a minister of the United Church because that's where the Methodist Church went in 1925. So let me think about that possibility for a nanosecond ... I've thought about it and the answer is "No". I think I'll stick with the Presbyterian Church no matter what the health risks!

Commenting on the results of this research, the Vice President of the Methodist Church in England said that he thought there were many different factors responsible for his denomination's better health and longevity. An important one is that, because of its historic involvement with the temperance movement, Methodist people tend to be largely the kind of people who avoid excess of any kind or description.¹

Now we Presbyterians can't let the Methodists get away with that, can we? Because, after all, don't we pride ourselves on that being our very approach to life. Don't we ministers always preach – and you good Presbyterians practise – the middle way, the temperate approach? Not for us over-indulgence in anything that could possibly be unhealthy whether it be alcohol or tobacco or fatty foods. Not for us any dissolute ways that would lead us to give into temptations of the flesh such as sex or gambling or materialism. Not, of course, that we can't enjoy these things to a certain extent but just as long as we don't enjoy them too much. And as long as we don't give the

impression we are actually having fun when we enjoy them!

You can also see that tempered lifestyle reflected in our worship week by week. Not for us the waving of hands during hymn-singing like the charismatic churches. No, we always do things decently and in good order. Not for us the dunking of the whole body in the pool of water as the Baptists do but just the modest sprinkling of a few meagre drops of water over the head. Not for us the celebration of Communion every week like the Anglicans but just 4-6 times a year. Not for us the over-ornate sanctuaries of the Roman Catholics with gold-leafed columns and intricate mosaics. No. Simplicity, unfussiness and minimalism are the hallmarks of Presbyterianism. As in our lifestyle so in our worship "moderation in all things" is our motto.

The concept of moderation is not new, of course, by any means. The ancient Greek historian Hesiod wrote "Observe due measure, moderation is best in all things" while playwright, Euripides, added that "Moderation is the noblest gift of heaven". Socrates, warned his listeners not to get carried away by emotion but that moderation is the best way. Then Aristotle, also cautioned that extremes of any kind are to be avoided. The balanced middle way, or "The Golden Mean" is the highest ideal of all.²

So, we Presbyterians can take heart. Our mantra of "moderation in all things" has good, solid roots. And we can continue to practice it with confidence knowing that we are firmly in the centre of God's will and purpose. Bending not to the right or the left. Not going off at tangents or to extremes. Never going overboard or going over the top. But always steering a good middle course.

Unfortunately, though, into every ointment comes a little fly. Just as we think that our moderate Presbyterian stance is the way to go, just as we pride ourselves on resisting the excesses of others, something or someone comes along to question and challenge us. And today it comes unexpectedly in the form of a widowed lady in Mark's Gospel.³ A poor woman in black who shuffles quietly past the Temple offering box, humbly dropping in two copper coins. And no-one notices her – except Jesus who sees her action in stark contrast to the ostentatious manner of the rich who flounce past so pretentiously ensuring that everyone sees them making their offering.

And Jesus commends the widow to the disciples because, whereas the others gave a little out of their plenty, she gave all she had. She made a total commitment, literally not knowing where her next two pennies would come from. Says *The Women's Bible*

Commentary, “For one whose only protection from complete destitution is the little money she possesses, to give all of it to the Temple is to consign herself to disaster. Yet, she does this without fanfare or desire for glory but out of faith.”⁴

Supposing this woman had been a Presbyterian, would she have done what she did that day? I wonder! Maybe she would have stifled the urge to give more by saying to herself, “Hold on! I must remember to practise moderation in all things. I have to balance my religion’s needs with my own legitimate requirements. Not only that. There are those who are much better able to give than me. And, anyway, doesn’t the Temple have vast trust funds?”

But, rather than practise moderation, this woman did something very un-Presbyterian. She got carried away by her religious devotion and gave extravagantly. She acted, not out of calm reflection, but out of raw emotion since she cared so deeply about God and about the things of God.

Now, because this widow did what she did all these years ago – and because Jesus used her example to challenge the disciples – so we, contemporary followers, are challenged in our times to examine our moderation-in-all-things approach to Christianity. Not that, in a world where there is so much excess and so many go to the extreme, that the middle and moderate way is always wrong. Of course, not. But we are challenged by this story in the Gospel, not always to act in a moderate way. Rather, to act in many situations a little more spontaneously, if not impulsively, with regard to our faith.

So we are challenged by this story of the Widow’s Mite to let go of our traditional Presbyterian reserve and let emotion play its rightful part. To practise our Christianity, not through quiet, calm deliberation, but because of what we feel for God and for the task to which he has called us. To enter into the worship of our church and the life of prayer with a new-found enthusiasm because we can feel Christ’s presence right beside us and around us. To speak passionately to non-believers of the faith that is within us. To embrace the cause of the hungry and the dispossessed and the marginalised with an ardent concern born out of our love for God and his world. In all matters of faith and action, we are challenged “to give and not to count the cost”.⁵

In the World Cup of soccer taking place in South Africa at the moment, some of the big-name players have not performed as well as expected. They are rich in talent but when the big occasion has come along, they have not lived up to the hype. Their fans know they can do better, their coaches know they can do better, they themselves know they can do better. But, in the crucial game, they have not been able to produce their best form. One criticism that has been made of these players is that they have not played with real passion. They have gone

through the motions of the game but they have not performed with that fervent, zealous, spirited, do-or-die desire to win for their country. Time and again the word “passion” comes up. This player, that player, it is said, needs to play with a lot more passion.⁶

Maybe this is a criticism that can also be levelled at Christians today, that we need to show a lot more passion for our faith and in our practice of it. So many seem to approach Christianity in a cool, detached spirit as if it were a sin to show any emotion or enthusiasm. Maybe it just reflects the spirit of the times, the way people feel about many things in their everyday lives. But what is the future of Christianity if we don’t practise it with a lot more passion and with a greater sense of urgency? What is the future of Christianity if we don’t fight the good fight with a more fervent belief that it is of utmost importance that we win that fight? That fight which is, of course, the fight to overcome corrupt principalities and powers and establish the Kingdom of God.

In many of his writings, celebrated author C.S. Lewis often talked about the dangers of the moderate, dispassionate approach to Christianity. In *The Screwtape Letters*, he examined different ways the forces of evil could diminish God’s power. He had the Devil, Screwtape, tell his apprentice devil that advising the moderate approach is one of the best ways to undermine Christianity. “Talk to [Christians] about ‘moderation in all things’. If you can get [them] to think that ‘religion is all very well up to a point’, then you can feel happy about [their] soul. A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all – and more amusing.”⁷

Thus spake the Devil. “A moderated religion is as good for us as no religion at all.” Now, if, like the widow of old, that does not drive us to embrace our faith more passionately, then I don’t know what will!

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¹ Martin Beckford, “Methodists live more than seven years longer than the rest of the population, according to an academic study”, *The Daily Telegraph*,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/7855002/Methodists-live-more-than-seven-years-longer-than-rest-of-population.html>

² “Moderation in all things”,

http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/31/messages/1125.html cf.

also William Willimon, “Praise for the Passionate”, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2006, pp. 30 & 31

³ Mark 12:38-44

⁴ Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992, pp.269-270

Willimon, *Op. Cit.* P.30.

⁵ Prayer of St. Francis

⁶ “World Cup 2010: ‘African football needs overhaul’”,

www.cameroononline.org

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Amereon Limited (March 1986), cf. Willimon, *Op. Cit.* p.31