

Rev. James MacIver Testimony

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Preacher: Rev. James MacIver

[0 : 00] Thank you for such a warm welcome again. It's a bit of a dangerous thing to say to me, come on, as long as you like. Jodo's probably thinking, well, I hope it goes on for an hour to do it.

It's a great pleasure again to be here and a privilege to be able to say something about my own experience in coming to know the Lord. There's a danger always in that, of course, that we exalt ourselves rather than the Lord, which is not what we want to do.

Our testimony should be about the Lord's grace and the Lord's beauty and his power and everything else to do with the way which he came to save us.

Now, I'm going to begin firstly by just telling you where I'm from. And what I'm going to say is going to offend you all, heros. But I think there's one other person here that will agree with me, and I want him to stick his hand up in agreement.

That is that I come from the most beautiful part of the world in tongue. Yeah, there you go. Of course, I'm not saying by that that Harris isn't more beautiful.

[1 : 11] But that's where I come from. I came from tongue, come from tongue. Eir tongue to be more precise, which is the furthest in part of tongue as you go through the village of tongue. You come to Eir tongue, the innermost part of that village.

So I was brought up there. I was brought up there through the late 50s and into the 60s. So I am quite old, even though my hair is still black.

And there was a time when church was quite strong. And like many of yourselves, I was brought up to go to church and to attend Sunday school.

Ian and I shared many Sunday school outings. And also all the way through primary school. We were schoolmates going through primary school along with other guys as well.

So that's really where I was from. And I got to know the gospel really through going to church and through Sunday school and learning catechism, as we did in those days, and I'm sure it's still due, and certain psalms.

[2 : 12] And of course in school as well, we actually had to learn passages from the Bible, such as Isaiah 53. Now all of that really stood me in good stead. Although it was way, way in the back of my mind after I left home and went to the mainland, and never really thought much about these things at all, to be honest.

And during my secondary school days in the Nicholson right through to sixth year, especially in the latter part of those years, I didn't really think much about spiritual things, if I'm honest, and thought that everything would just fall into place in my life.

And it was only after really that the Lord began to work in my life that I realised the benefit of having had those things in my younger days. Some people might say to you today that learning things from the Catechism or by rote like that is not really of much benefit, but I found it hugely helpful when the Lord started working in my life because I didn't actually have to ask, well, what's happening to me? I didn't have to ask myself, what do I need to do in order to have this guilt of my sin dealt with? I knew that I needed Christ, I knew that I needed the salvation that God had provided in him, and all of that came through the Gospel.

And I would say to all you young folks and children, young people here tonight, it is really important that you take in the Gospel in your young days. There's going to be a great store of truth in your hearts.

[3 : 46] And that store of truth in your hearts will make itself known, I hope it will make itself known in your case, in your younger days. But even then, I hope it will come at some point in your life that God will bless that store of truth, and from it you will come to realise that God indeed has spoken to many times through the Gospel.

So I went through school and managed to get a few hires together, although the final few years of school were, well, I won't say what they were about really, but they weren't much about studying, other interests had taken over.

And so when I left school, I had a few hires and got quite a number of O-levels, but didn't really want to know, I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life, what sort of career I would choose, so I ended up taking a year out just to think things through, got a job locally in Stornoway, and then began to think over that year just where my life was going in terms of my career, but still not thinking at all much about how things were spiritually with me.

By that stage, somebody else was actually in my life, a young girl called, a young woman called Donna McLeod, and we had started going out together after I left school, and I had kept that up. Now she actually had to, I'm just trying to shorten it a wee bit for you, so you're not here all night, but she had actually decided quite early on that she would go to do nursing, so she went off to Aberdeen to do nursing, and she went to train as a nurse kid in Aberdeen.

[5 : 30] And I was still back home in Lewis, and you know, in those days, it was pretty tough being in love if you didn't have a phone in the house. And you didn't have the advantage you've got now of picking out a mobile phone, and wherever you are, you just get in touch, you text or something.

Can you young folks really imagine what a world is like when you have to walk a mile and a half to a phone box to actually afford your girlfriend? That's not the kind of world you want to live in, is it? But it was the world I lived in, and many others will relate to that as well. Some of you may have actually had to walk longer than that. So you had to really time things so that when you were on the phone, she was in Aberdeen, I was in town, we'd make an arrangement, okay, next phone call, two nights time, eight o'clock.

And of course you got to the phone but somebody was in it. Frustrating. Yeah, that's the kind of world we read from our faith. Anyway, she was converted under the ministry of the late Reverend Douglas Macmillan, most of you, some of you, this will know.

Douglas Macmillan's ministry in Aberdeen, then went to Glasgow, and then went to what was then the Free Church College for a time, and wrote a number of books as well. Now, I could actually tell because the phone calls weren't all that regular, we depended on almost daily letters or notes going back and forth, and I began to see from her letter something had happened in her life.

[6 : 58] Of course she began explaining it to me anyway, that she had come to know the Lord, that she was now a Christian, and was following the Lord, and inevitably all the letters had things like, why are you not a Christian yet?

Are you not going to think seriously about these issues? So, they were actually more epistles than love letters to be honest. Which I'm glad for now, because it did actually make me think at least a bit at that time as to what had happened in her life and where I stood in relation to that.

Anyway, I decided I would do agriculture, a good college of agriculture in Aberdeen, so, for that reason, but especially for the reason that Donna had gone to Aberdeen, I thought, well that's the best thing to do, I'll go to Aberdeen, culture birds with one stone, I'll be able to be more regularly with my girlfriend, I'll also study agriculture, things will work out okay.

I went in first year of that course, three year course, we had to spend on a farm, just practically on a farm, just learning different aspects of farming. Hands up all those who like Mackey's ice cream. Lots of people like Mackey's ice cream. Well, I ended up working on Mackey's farm for a year, unfortunately in those days they hadn't started making ice cream. But there was lots of milk and other things going around, so that's where I was, about 20 miles, 22 miles, outside of Aberdeen here, a place called Old Meldrum.

[8 : 31] And, I was thrown in at the deep end, if you like, although I used to hard work on the croft, but when I got there the farmer decided, well you start off in the Davie, in the milking side, in the Davie, where the milking takes place, and, okay, that's fine, so I asked the foreman in charge, when do we start?

He says, half past three in the morning. So, it wasn't very good for your social life, and half past three in the morning, sometimes I had to go out and take the cows in, and in Aberdeen shed, middle of winter, I'm for cobbled, no boys like, in the middle of winter in Aberdeen shed, very, very cold, on an open tractor, but that was, that was life, in those days, it was good for me to learn some of the hardships of life too.

Anyway, I'm rambling on a wee bit, but I ended up in Aberdeen, in Old Meldrum, working on this farm, and every third weekend, we had off, so I was able to go into Aberdeen and stay with people

there until Sunday night, because I had to be back early for Monday morning to start milking again. And during those weekends, and Sunday especially, I would go to church with Donna twice a day, and in the course of time, over a few months at least, I began to realise there was something much more to this than I had, first of all, realised, something more to this gospel, something more to this Jesus, something more to this church, to this worship business.

So I then began to really start trying to understand the sermon, what was being said, and I thought, well, I owe it to the man who's in the pulpit at least to try and listen to him and take in what's being said, because he's put a lot of work into it, and even from that point of view, it's surely best if I just give him some attention.

[10:24] Now all of that went on for quite a while, and it came to a point where Donna by this time had come to Communicant, actually to Communion, and I had got to know a lot of the young folks in the Youth Fellowship there, and would be with them on a Sunday night, because there in Aberdeen, Saturday nights too sometimes, and I began to really see that these young folks had something which I lacked, and I began to see that what they really had was what Donna had come to know as well, that they had the Lord in their life, that they had joy, that they had an outlook, an attitude that I just didn't have, and I really began to think about that much more seriously, and it came to a head on a Communion morning just like we had here this morning.

The preacher for that occasion was the late Principal Clement Grimm, who was Principal then in the Free Church College as it then was, and of course, interestingly, he became my principal in college when I went through to college to study for the ministry, but he came to preach that Sunday in Aberdeen.

I don't remember his text at all. I remember it was all about the sufferings of Christ, and I remember how I felt. My sins had been bothering me for quite a while before then.

I felt the weight of my sin, the guilt of my sin. I knew I wasn't right with God, and this needed to be dealt with, but the more Clement Grimm went on preaching about the sufferings of Christ, the worse I felt.

I really felt terribly crushed and guilty during that service, and in fact, when I ran out of the church, it's not the church they now have in Aberdeen, it's a smaller one, before then on a state called Deistead, and I was quite early at the church for some reason, and I sat about halfway down the church, and those people went to take communion at the Lord's table at the front, and then those who were going mostly sat at the back of the church, and for some reason or other, I had sat in the middle, and I really began to feel quite isolated, quite left out of things, and I knew I really didn't belong to those people that were going forward to the front of the congregation to the Lord's table, I didn't really like to look to see who was behind me, and in actual fact, I felt kind of in between.

[12:53] I know, theologically, that there's no such thing as being half saved or half enough or out of Christ, but the way I felt at the time, I knew I didn't belong to those people at the front, but I also didn't want to belong to the lost, and I felt I was at a stage where I was just half in between and having to make up my mind, and there, really, I was confronted with the need to just decide upon this issue.

I would not say today that that was a moment when I was converted. I may have been converted actually before that, or after that, I'm not sure, but it was really a defining moment in my life.

It was the moment that really made up my mind for me that I had to become a Christian, and without that, I would be lost. I would be in my sins.

I would go to hell if I died. And from then on, I really began very earnest reading my Bible and trying as best I could myself to pray.

It was a very difficult environment because I was in a hall of residence outside of Aberdeen by the stage when I had started in the first year in the actual college itself.

[14:07] And there were no other Christians there at all, and it was very difficult just to try and get some help other than when I went to church. But the benefit of that was I was then able to go to church every weekend, every Sunday rather than every third week.

And gradually, through help from other younger Christians and from some of the older folk in the Aberdeen congregation, I began to more and more understand what it meant to be a Christian and that it wasn't about your own feelings or emotions.

It was really what you made of Christ. Do you accept Christ as he is or not? Do you accept God's salvation in him or not? And every time I tried looking at that, I thought, well yes, what alternative is he?

And so I began gradually to realise that the Lord had come into my life and I began looking for assurance and that assurance didn't come immediately and it's something that, you see, I always felt that those who had been converted suddenly or dramatically had a great advantage.

And they could point to where they were, where they were standing, what they were doing, when the Lord suddenly came into their life, bang, everything changed. And I began to feel at that early stage in my experience, if something like that hadn't happened, then don't have the real thing.

[15:34] But then others would say to me, well, that's not the only type of conversion there is. There are people who, just like the dawning of the day, go through from darkness to light, very gradually, and it's impossible to say when that moment of transition exists.

But it happened, God actually did it, and the one thing I could say that every Christian can say is, I know I'm not what I used to be, whatever I think I am.

A whole outlook changes, your priorities change, and your relationship take on a different perspective as well. I go back to Donna because she was very instrumental in helping me along and sometimes gave me a kick every so often spiritually, just to make sure I wasn't falling asleep or falling by the wayside spiritually.

And there was one occasion when, in the middle of my course, I was working for three months in the summer at Tariff in Aberdeen as well. And again, I'd have to go back on something out in the bus working early Monday morning.

And there was one particular occasion, I remember being at the bus stop and, at the bus station rather, and she did say to me, you know, if you aren't a Christian, then you can't get married.

[17:00] We had decided at this stage the relationship was going to be a lasting one. We loved each other. We had anticipated eventually getting married. But this is what she said, unless you're a Christian, we can't get married because she took very strongly the view that a Christian should only marry in the Lord, in other words, another Christian.

So, 20 miles in the dark in a bus to Tariff thinking about this was pretty tough. And I thought, well, if I don't really fully commit myself to the Lord, I'm really going to lose a lot of things that are precious to me in this relationship.

I've always got to add a rider to that. All right, so, don't please conclude from that that I became a Christian to keep my girlfriend. That wasn't the reason.

But I'm saying, yes, that she, with the stand she took and with the witness she had for the Lord, was really a great influence in my thinking towards my own commitment to the Lord as well.

From later on, I came to start attending a prayer meeting and then came to take communion about a year or so after that in Aberdeen. There are two things I want to say from that for ourselves just to encourage us, I hope.

[18:20] And it's true, I think, in every congregation it should be and I'm sure it is indeed true here from what we know from being with you this weekend. Firstly, the benefit that younger people have from older Christians.

I was really amazed that every Sunday I turned up at church in Aberdeen older Christians and by that I mean people who were the age I know that but they were absolutely committed to making sure that all of us students had a place to go to for lunch, spent the afternoon with them, talked over things with us, relaxed us and every single Sunday that happened and I thought that's really such an amazing thing.

Why would a couple, an older couple who don't know me at all or didn't know me until a few weeks or months back, why would they do this? Why would they take me into their home and be so concerned about it?

Well, because they were Christians they wanted to show the love of Jesus. So that's so important and it's important for younger folks to remember that too. It's great having our own age groups, it's great having meetings of our own age groups, young people's fellowships, older people's fellowships, but the best thing of all is to have plenty of a mix of ages and experiences to learn from each other.

But the other thing, the second thing that I learned a lot from there was the young Christians themselves, obviously they met in these fellowships and what I learned from them was absolutely crucial in just letting me see what a Christian life was like.

[20:02] Here were a lot of young people who looked after each other, who enjoyed being with each other and who had these wonderful meetings where they praised the Lord different ways and where they shared fellowship and testimony and where they welcomed the likes of me, who was not

then a Christian when I started off there and yet they didn't say, well you're not a Christian, you can't really come and share this with us.

They were absolutely committed as the older ones were to bringing me into the circle of their fellowship and really making sure that I was comfortable and that I felt at home as far as possible with them.

Of course, I didn't feel at home because I didn't belong to them at that stage spiritually. But what they were and what they were doing and what they showed to me was hugely important in forming my own opinions as to what a Christian life was like.

That it was far, far more than just going to church and turning up on a Sunday along with others to worship God. That it was a week-long, indeed on a daily basis, testimony and witness to the Lord. So that's really taken me up to the time when I became a communicant. We then got married in 1976 and I found me up for three years at a farm near Inveruri, which was also outside Aberdeen, but we came regularly to church to worship in Aberdeen.

[21 : 29] So the other point I would make from that is that because of this experience I had on a Sunday morning on a communion, this really helped me greatly when I became a minister and we began to start studying for the ministry.

Sometimes we think that perhaps the most effective sermons with regard to evangelism or people being converted are those that really make an appeal to the unconverted or that take a text that's obviously slanted towards those who are not yet saved.

And speak from that. Of course, that is hugely important, but God's not confined to that. And that's why I've always encouraged in the congregations I've been in, on a communion Sunday morning, even if people are not going to go and sit at the Lord's table, please don't be absent.

Be there to actually see and hear that occasion. Because for me, it's really what became that crucial moment in my life as I said, if I had decided well, it's a communion, it's really for the Lord's people, why should I go?

I would have missed out on that. And that would have been really serious. So I've always remembered that, that sermons, even at a communion time, focusing on Christ, of us who saw this evening, Christ and who he is, they really are so important.

[22 : 51] We don't preach ourselves. we don't preach faith, we don't preach repentance, we preach the need for faith, the need for repentance, but we preach Christ.

And it's Christ that we need to be confronted with in the gospel, because he is the saviour, not of faith, not of prayers, not any of that. He is the saviour, and it is he that we try to present in our preaching.

So, to probably say it enough,