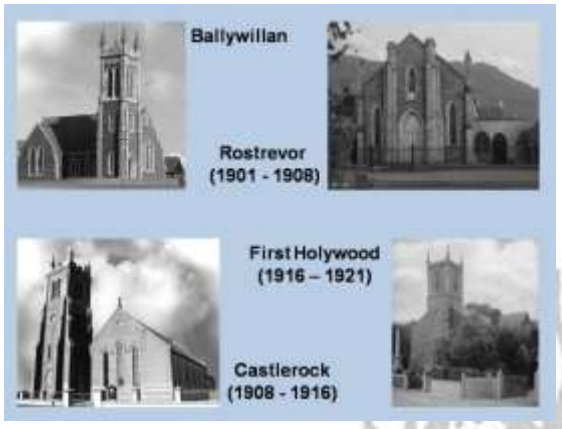
The Very Rev. Dr. James B. Woodburn M.A. D.D.

(1922 – 1942)

On 6th January 1922, the people of Fitzroy gathered to witness the installation of their new minister. They must have pondered what the 'new man' would be like - tall, serious and smiling shyly from the pulpit. He spoke of his 'deep humility' at the call to this historic church and hoped to see youth and age wedded together in the congregational life in the years to come.



Dr. James Barclay Woodburn came from a respected Presbyterian family – his father had been a cleric at Ballywillan on the north coast and his brother was a professor at Magee College. He had had ample ministerial experience – at Rostrevor, Castlerock and Holywood. One journal spoke of his 'wise and sympathetic' demeanour and his 'cultured and earnest sermons'.

Dr. Woodburn was clearly a man of intellect – educated not just at Queens but in Edinburgh and Trinity College, Dublin. He had been honoured with a doctorate by the Presbyterian church for his scholarship and in the pre-war years he had spent a term at Germany's Heidelberg University where the controversial craft of Biblical Criticism subjected Scriptural texts to rigorous stylistic analysis and the great sociologist of religion, Ernst Troeltsch studied the church as a social phenomenon.

In these years, Dr. Woodburn has also written a book called 'The Ulster Scot' – a topical attempt to define the culture of Northern protestants at a time when Sir Edward Carson was stirring up the anti-home rule movement in Ulster. In this text, Dr. Woodburn had not been afraid to speak his mind about England's role in Irish affairs, saying – '*The history of Ireland is a sad one…by far the largest share of the blame must be laid upon England, who in all conceivable ways, misgoverned the people*.'

Now however, according to the author, Ulster was a proud and prosperous place, reversing centuries of poverty and misgovernment, possessing the largest shipbuilding yard in the world and other mighty industries. Dr. Woodburn wrote in glowing terms of the Ulster Scots who were the instigators of this advance and '*were brave, fit and courageous'*, being '*a more virile race than the south*'. This, the author thought, was due in some measure to the bracing northern climate but he above all believed that '*the chief reason is the difference in religion*.'

Sadly much dark water had passed under the bridge between 1912 when the book came out and 1922 when its author began his time at Fitzroy. A world war had swallowed up the young men of a generation and now Ulster found itself in the grip of civil conflict over the decision to partition Ireland

Meanwhile the factories were sending home workers, one by one, as economic recession loomed. The Belfast of January 1922 was one where churchgoers had to make their way briskly home and stay indoors as there was a nightly curfew from 10-30 till 5. On 22 November 1921, just a few weeks before Dr. Woodburn's installation, law and order had been passed into the hands of the new N.I. government. During that week, 27 people died in riots and shootings.

By the early months of 1922, churches were being bombed, grenades tossed onto crowded trams, whole families being murdered in their beds. By the late summer, calm was being restored as a massive police presence clamped down on things. But over 450 lives had been lost in Belfast alone. There were now 50,000 constables - one for every 6 families. The Ulster of Dr. Woodburn's first few years in office was peaceful but it was a police state.

So much for those literary idealisations of the Ulster Scot and his prosperous little city - Belfast's reputation was now one founded on sectarianism and the Catholic population had taken the brunt of the violence :

- 11,000 Belfast Catholics had lost their jobs,
- 27,000 of them forced out of their homes,
- 500 Catholic businesses destroyed.

They had comprised less than a quarter of the town's population but over half the fatalities.
As for that pre-war prosperity – by 1922, 23% of the labour force was unemployed and the figure stayed at 20% through most of the decade. The first years of Dr. Woodburn's ministry were conducted in a city of wretched poverty.

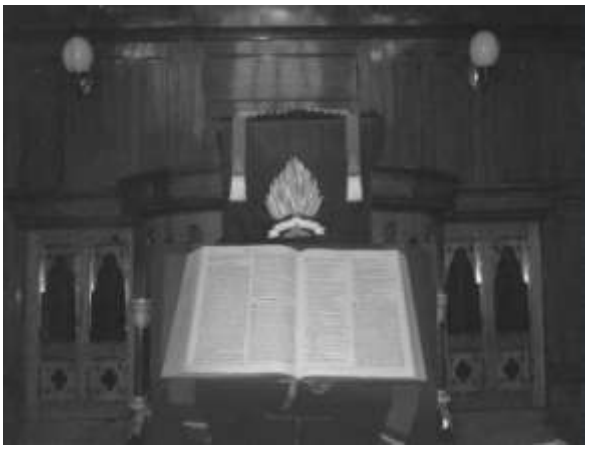
And yet it must be said that Fitzroy in these inter-war years was somewhat cocooned form the worst of the violence and the grimmest of the poverty. True, there was church outreach in the less salubrious streets of the lower Ormeau Road but the Fitzroy building was mainly surrounded by houses belonging to families who, whilst not overly prosperous, were nonetheless headed by office-workers, skilled tradesmen or at best professionals – and thus sheltered from the worst effects of economic downturn. The legacy of The Troubles was still visible though.

Margaret Ritchie – who is now 93 – could, as a young girl, see trams going down the road with protective wire mesh over the windows to prevent stoning. And Nessie Walsh, growing up in the church premises because her father was the church officer (or caretaker), recalls the vicinity around the church as a 'mixed' area, with little poverty and lots of relaxed friendship between Catholic and Protestant children, who if they discussed religious difference at all, tended to joke about it rather than throw abuse or stones.

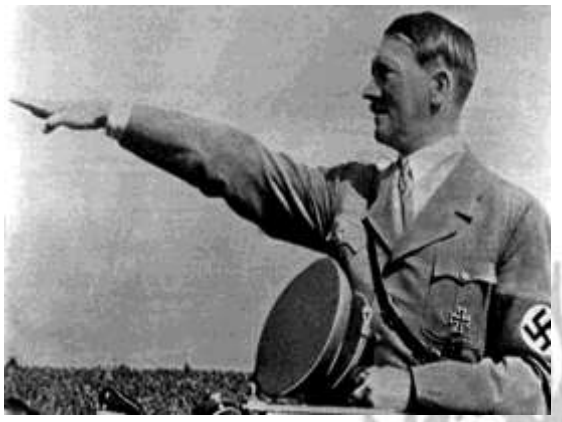
Fitrzoy Church Officer's House

And so Dr. Woodburn' years of ministry passed happily onwards. He became known for his reserved but thoughtful manner in visitation, his shy smile and his 'may I come in?' at the door. In the pulpit, his sermons were carefully timed. James Walsh would set a pocket watch in a small groove carved into the wooden pulpit rail – you can still see it there today – which the preacher could consult, in the absence of a proper clock in the sanctuary. Dr. Woodburn loved music and many in the congregation observed his radiant face when the choir sang one of his favourite anthems. Looking down from the pulpit each Sunday he could see each family in their exact place, in their rented pew. And in the gallery were the lads of the Boys' Brigade, on whom he could keep a close eye.

And then there were the Communion Sundays for which most of the elders dressed in morning coats with striped trousers and dark ties – and the bread was placed in carefully cut cubes on the plates, from a loaf specially prepared by Ormo Bakery. The women were, of course, all dressed in their hats and gloves. The silence before church started was a solemn one. James Walsh walked up to the pulpit and set the open Bible there to mark the opening of the service.



And all agreed that Dr. Woodburn was an eloquent preacher but also a man who wanted the church to be more open to the teeming streets of the city outside these walls. Margaret Ritchie can remember him standing with arms outstretched, saying 'If I had my way, those doors would always be open.' Everyone knew too that he had his own cross to bear – his wife was seldom seen and known to be an invalid though the exact nature of her affliction it is hard to say.

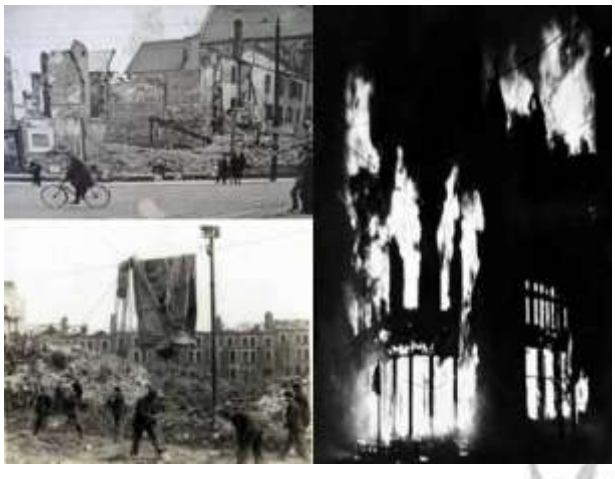


But war-clouds were soon looming yet again. In 1939, in response to Hitler's invasion of Poland, Britain declared war on Germany and 6 years of strife and struggle began. Black out curtains were purchased for the windows of the church. White paint was applied to the edges of the front steps for visibility in the darkness. The premises at the rear of the church were used as a billet for soldiers. Hopefully no Nazi bombers would make it as far as Belfast.

It was in 1939 that Dr. Woodburn got the invitation to be Moderator, which term of office began in June 1940, just as the defeated British troops were lining up on the beaches of Dunkirk, awaiting evacuation.

Everyone in Fitzroy was agreed that this would be tough assignment for their minister, travelling long distances by night to visit far-flung congregations under black-out conditions and seeing others suffer as news arrived home of a loved one killed in battle.

What no-one foresaw was that close to the end of that moderatorial year, the war would come to Belfast. In three nights of bombardment, in April and May 1941, the Luftwaffe arrived over a city that had too few anti aircraft guns, too few shelters, too meagre a fire service, too slipshod an evacuation plan and whole districts where working-class people were packed into tiny houses in redbrick streets, like tinder for the falling bombs. Almost 1000 were to die, over twice as many as had died in The Troubles, and it was happening on Dr. Woodburn's watch.



Nessie Walsh looked on as panicked crowds with a few possessions in their hands, filed up the Lagan embankment to escape westwards at night out of the city. She watched her father turn off the church's gas mains and fill buckets of water to deal with incendiary bombs. Margaret Ritchie, who had been in a local Air Raid Precautions unit, got to the roof of the Donegall Pass barracks, and watched the city centre blaze. The next morning, Dublin Road was so full of charred paper and other debris that she could have waded through it, ankle deep.

And then down at St George's Market, the bodies were being laid out in rows for recognition and Dr. Woodburn had to be there to comfort the grieving, as indeed he did in numerous little bomb-shattered working-class houses, such as he had never been in during his entire life. Or at countless gravesides, helping to take part in the services. Fitzroy's minister was in a state of shock. And it was as much about the social and economic conditions of the working-class people of Belfast as about the devastation that had rained down on them from the sky.

He wrote to one newspaper –

> '*I was inexpressibly shocked by the sight of the people I saw walking in the streets. I have been 19 years working in Belfast and I never saw the like of them before - wretched people, very undersized and underfed and down-and-out looking men and women. They had been bombed out of their houses and were wandering the streets. Is it credible to us that there should still be such people in a Christian country? We have got to see that there is more talk of justice, we have got to see it enacted and the work will have to begin immediately. If something is not done, to remedy this rank inequality, there will be revolution after the war. …*'

The newspapers reported the unprecedented fact that Dr. Woodburn had then approached the Stormont government with criticisms of its policy on housing, and in his address included the following fairly outrageous passage –

> '*A minister whom I recently met said to me – whose congregation had been bombed – if he could get the people entirely out of the way, he would be happy if the Germans would come again and bomb the place flat…*'

It was a long time ago that Dr. Woodburn was writing about the noble virility of the Ulster Scot and the prosperity of his city. The Moderator had seen the waifs in the bombed out slums and he knew that shipbuilding in the yards had been reduced by the Luftwaffe to a half of what it once was.

On 9 June, 1941, Fitzroy welcomed back its minister. He was 69 years old and they maybe thought he would occupy his former role for a few more years. But James Barclay Woodburn was an exhausted man. Margaret Ritchie recalls him saying he often thought of all the sin and suffering in the world and had to go out into his garden to look at the roses, in order to regain some composure. His resignation was offered in early 1942 and took effect from October 31st when presentations were made to him and his wife and their daughter Joy. By May 1943, the Rev. R.E. Alexander was in place and Dr. Woodburn took on a quieter role as senior cleric, often helping to officiate at communion services and visit the elderly. Two years later the war was at an end. He stayed on in Belfast for a few years but then retired to a home in the little village of Angmering, near Worthing in Sussex where, in 1957, he passed away.

So what can we learn from the Woodburn era – begun and ended in a city marred by violence, whether from civil conflict or world war?

It seems to me that here was a man who began his ministerial career in calm rural locations such as Castlerock and Rostrevor and started his intellectual life in serene academic citadels such as Heidelberg or in his study, writing about a rather idealised Ulster. He ended his official career shocked to the core by the deprivation of Belfast's working-class streets and determined to draw attention to the inequalities that bedevilled his adopted city.

And are inequalities and forms of deprivation still around today or have we solved our problems?

May I offer you a few facts that might help you make up your own mind?

Let me look with you at one particular group in our society, the Loyalist working-class.

The Department of Social Development did a survey of Loyalist areas in 2004. Among the worst statistics were those for education – whilst 39% of the children in N.I. who sat the 11+ that year got an A grade, the figure was 8% on the Shankill.

In this area, 79% of those in the 25+ age bracket had no qualifications whatsoever to help them find work in this information age. In the Northern Ireland census, 3 years earlier, let's compare the figures for the Shankill with those for the Malone area.

- Population –
  - Shankill : c4,000 inhabitants
  - Malone : c6,000 inhabitants
- Lone Parents -
  - Shankill : 451
  - Malone : 112
- People with limiting long-term illness –
  - Shankill : 36%
  - Malone : 12%

Let's go the Loyalist Sunnylands estate in Carrickfergus, demonised as the home of so called UDA thugs.

25% of the children get 5 good passes at GCSE there whilst in Carrick as a whole the figure is 65%.

Out of nearly 1400 young people who enrolled in Higher Education in Carrickfergus in 2001, only 17 were from Sunnylands.

Or move to the equally demonised Kilcooley estate in Bangor.

54% of the people have no qualifications but the figure rises to 90% in the over 60's age group, indicating that at that later stage of working life, Kilcooley residents possess little or no chance of a stable, remunerative or rewarding job and face their last years on the few quid of a government pension.

No wonder that the DSD report found throughout N.I.

'*a community feeling unequal, neglected, abandoned and lacking in confidence.*'

And are there reasons why Protestant communities have never banded together to do something positive at this disadvantage? As a loyalist community worker said in another report for the Office of First Minister –

'*Protestant people showing weakness would mean the N.I. state isn't working, that the state had failed - and that would give credence to our enemies.*'

These problems were there back in the 1990s, in Loyalist communities, even before paramilitary feuds and Drumcree caused further havoc. A report done then on the Shankill's health suggested that much harm was done by the fact that :

- 34% of males were economically inactive;
- 56% of females were economically inactive;
- 78% of homes depended on some kind of social security benefit;
- 30% of all homes depended on mid-week borrowing to get by;
- 11% of all adults had mental health issues;
- 25% of all women had received medication;
- 17% of all lone pensioners were deemed to be suffering from depression.

And in the midst of all this legacy of ill health, relations with the police have been gradually deteriorating; a report commissioned in 2002 concluded that young working-class Loyalists felt disenfranchised now that the PSNI was in need of educationally qualified recruits and wanted to boost the intake of Catholics -

'*the police here are regarded as a foreign body, not belonging to the local community*'

were the precise words.

In the middle of this, the elderly are particularly alienated, as one interviewee told North Belfast's LINC centre recently :

'*you live beside ones and don't know their name … you are more isolated because you keep your door locked and be wary opening it … once upon a time we were all dependant on one another*' .

Particularly vulnerable are those close to interfaces.

As another interviewee said,

> '*where I live now is right on an interface and even with the peace line there are still attacks … petrol bombs and all sorts … when you ask the peelers all they say is "we have a patrol car in the area…*" *What good is that?*'

Protestant working-class alienation is compounded in many parts of Ulster by being in a troubled minority.
In Derry, 83% of the Protestants on the city side left between 1971 and 1991. Not surprisingly 80% of all Derry Protestants feel their community to be in decline, and 65% feel the Catholics of the city want all of them out.

Glenn Barr, a local community activist on the Waterside told me recently –

> '*the people here are in a pretty bad shape … leaderless, uninterested in voting, subject to the drink culture, knowing little or nothing about their history … those who could, moved to the North Antrim Coast. The ones left behind have low morale …*'

And what about the next generation, the young people?

Listen to what one Elim church worker told me about his work with at-risk Loyalist youth in Portadown:

> '*we work full-time with kids who gather by the River Bann to drink and take drugs … cider, beer, alcopops, ecstasy, cannabis, solvents. We have found socks, which the kids spray with deodorant to inhale the fumes. We have found canisters of Ronson lighter gas, furniture polish, nail varnish… we have had a young lad died form inhaling Lynx body spray. A 16 year old girl connected to our church also died from something similar …*'

So do we have scriptural injunctions to care as a church for the poor – both the poor in financial terms and the poor in spirit?

Of course we do.

To look after the needy and the vulnerable and marginalized in this province?

Of course we do.

To help the single mothers struggling to cope with parenthood in the Shankill, the Village and the Donegall Pass, and the kids seeking dangerous thrills to deal with the harshness of life in the estates of Portadown?

Of course we do.

From the Pentateuch onwards, the Jewish people were told to care for the struggling in their midst. In Deuteronomy, financial indebtedness is to be wiped away on a regular basis –

> '*... you shall grant remission of debts because the Lord's remission has been proclaimed* …' says the scripture.

In the Psalms, a similar emphasis on social equity is to be found.

> '*Give justice to the weak and the orphan, maintain the right of the lowly and destitute*' says Psalm 82.

The Wisdom Books which follow are also insistent in their instructions –

> '*do not rob the poor or crush the afflicted … for the Lord will plead their cause ...*' says the author of Proverbs 22.

Then throughout the prophetic books we read, over and over again, the call to God's people to embrace social concern and fight social wrong – as in Micah 6 where the people are called to

> '*do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with their God.*'

In the New Testament we read in the 4 Gospels of Jesus' earthly ministry, overflowing in countless acts of goodness, healing and care. The arrival of His Kingdom is proclaimed in the Magnificat in which we have a vision of restoration for those banished to society's margins, where God has

> '*... lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty ...*'

Shortly after, in Luke chapter 4, Christ also proclaims

> '*The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the captives, to renew the sight of the blind and to let the oppressed go free …*'

Then in the Book of Acts, we learn that in the early church, care for the needy was uppermost in their mind –

> '*there was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and laid the proceeds at the disciples feet and it was distributed to each as they had need.*'

Likewise in the Epistles, we learn of the divine command to show constant compassion, as in Romans 12 where Paul calls out :

> '*let love be genuine…contribute to the needs of the saints and extend hospitality to strangers.*'

Or in Titus chapter 2 where the church is urged to be at all times '*zealous in good deeds.*'

But let's conclude with a return to the Old Testament and the book of Isaiah, chapter 58. There God reproves the children of Israel for imagining that fasting and other ritual observances matter most to him

> '*… is this not the fast that I choose?' God says – 'To loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your home and when you see the naked to cover him and not to hide yourself from your own flesh … then your ancient ruins will be rebuilt, you shall raise up the foundations of many generations and you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.*'

Just as in Dr. Woodburn's day – when he walked out from the relatively sheltered doors of Fitzroy into the bombed out slums of this city – there are breaches that need repaired, streets that need restored, poverty that needs addressed, addiction and political alienation that need healed, and people of our own flesh from whom we must no longer hide ourselves.

If you have been reminded of this fact from your encounter with Dr. James Barclay Woodburn, this morning, then it will have been well worth while researching this sermon. In thinking about Dr. Woodburn, we may then be reminded of the words of the Ulster poet Louis Macneice –

'***The man with the shy smile has left behind something that is intact.***'

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Dr. Woodburn's successor, the Rev. R. E. Alexander, had the following to say about the man with whom he worked at the start of his ministry in Fitzroy Avenue Presbyterian Church:

"Whilst he did not make friends quickly, the warmth of his friendship, once people understood and got to know him, was something to remember. Amongst his own people, he was beloved for the simplicity of his manner and the benevolence of his heart. He was respected for his inflexible integrity and unaffected piety. He stood for high moral principles, and did not deviate one iota from that which he believed to be right. He proclaimed the Word of Life diligently and faithfully attended the sick, comforted the sorrowing and visited his people. Yet, in all his work, carried out so conscientiously, there was a spirit of utter humility which few possess. No one ever got the impression that he was a "know all" or that he set himself up as an authority on moral standards. Very humbly he gave himself to the service of his Master and, ever ready to take the lowest place, it was only with extreme reluctance that he could be induced to move up higher. Dr. Woodburn's humble spirit had its roots in his devotional life. He lived near the mercy seat of God and his whole approach to God was one of devoted obedience to His Will."

Extract from Rev Alexander's Church Tribute delivered on the Sunday after Dr. Woodburn's death in 1957

"I was singularly fortunate in my Senior Minister, Dr. J. B. Woodburn, one of the godliest men that I have ever known. His friendship meant much to me in my early years in Fitzroy. Over a number of years, we jointly conducted the Morning Communion Service – I conducted the service and preached and he conducted the communion. In those days, there was not only a sermon, but these were also short addresses before and after communion. Dr. Woodburn's conduct of the communion service was memorable. He brought us very close to God. I saw people with tears in their eyes as he spoke of the love and mercy of our Heavenly Father.

His conduct of a funeral service was equally memorable. We did many funerals together, and I can still picture him dropping on his knees for the closing prayer in the home and, with upturned face, reminding the sorrowing of the Father's Home into which their loved one had entered, and speaking of the joy in heaven today and of the joy of reunion they would presently share. Heaven was such a real place to him.

When he left Belfast and went to live in the south of England, I felt a deep sense of loneliness, especially on Communion Sunday".

Extract from Rev Alexander's sermon celebrating the 40th Anniversary of Dr. Woodburn's ministry