

Opening speech of the Lord High Commissioner

General Assembly 2019

Her Majesty The Queen has commanded me to assure you of Her great sense of your steady and firm zeal for Her service and to assure you of Her resolution to maintain Presbyterian Church Government in Scotland. Pray be seated.

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: I begin by offering warmest congratulations on your appointment and by wishing you a richly rewarding year in office. That you have the most wonderful family, all committed to the church, to support you, (Son as Chaplain) that there are legions of friends and colleagues across many lands, gained through the Scripture Union is testament to your powers of loving leadership and inspiration. I count myself in a small way as one, having greatly enjoyed your Hitchhikers Guide to the Bible to which I give a shameless plug. You are fitted indeed for this highest honour in the gift of your colleagues.

I would like also pay tribute to Susan Brown. It was your hope, Susan, that each of us at last year's General Assembly would walk together and build fresh bonds of friendship Happily our paths have crossed since in several unlikely places - late one evening at the Premier Inn in Corby, Northamptonshire being one of the odder- I should hastily that you were well chaperoned by Mary Stobo your chaplain - You had just arrived to visit the two Kirks in that very Scottish corner of England, en route to Newcastle having flown in from visiting Jersey and Guernsey- such is a Moderator's life -you have indeed fulfilled it criss-crossing the globe as well as the UK bringing generosity, inspiration and love- I will not be alone in counting myself as one who has become a real friend. I wish you and Derrick as you take your lives back a rich sense of satisfaction and happiness at all you that you have achieved for the Church.

Moderator I feel deeply the honour of being invited once again by Her Majesty The Queen to represent her, to be returning to this gathering at the heart of our national life. I come with diffidence for as explained last year my roots are Episcopalian, but also with a new sense of connection for reasons unexpected. In October in the Privy Council Office I was privileged to be shown the very parchment with the Oath just quoted, to uphold Presbyterian Church Government, signed by Her Majesty at the Accession Council on 8th February 1952, only two days after her father died. It was highly moving in itself, and more so to discover that one of the ten signatories witnessing this historic moment was my own grandfather. It is a small matter in the scheme of things but for me it adds special significance to my presence this morning.

My memories of sharing this week with you last year are vivid and happy - first impressions endure but, Moderator no two General Assemblies can or should be the same. The issues, the chemistry will be different – you bring your own vision for your year – but I look forward with just as much anticipation to the coming days to meeting and talking with as many of you as is possible.

Even the rich historical framework established over 4 centuries evolves. The sharp eyed amongst you watching the screens of the procession outside may have noticed that the Lord High Commissioner's arrival is now attended by members of the Royal Company of Archers, The Queens Bodyguard for Scotland - armed with their bows - I don't think there is any concern for my safety, it is simply that in further recognition of this great occasion Her Majesty has indicated that henceforth the Royal Company should always be on duty for the opening ceremony.

Over the years though there have been other changes. Ursula Buchan whose grandfather, John, was Lord High Commissioner in 1935, sent me a photograph of her grandparent's journey here in an open, horse drawn, landau attended by the Royal Scots Greys with crowds 3 or 4 deep lining Princess Street. Of course it aroused a pang of regret for the old days but what really struck me was her comment that they had been in residence for the two full weeks of the Assembly. I believe that even into the 1970's General Assembly ran for ten days.

On Monday you will again be debating further changes to the duration and scale of this Assembly but not just that, now to the very structure of the Church in challenging times.

I can imagine that these will arouse strong concerns and possibly disagreements.

I wish you well as you tackle these matters for regardless of the outcomes I believe the Church can set an important example in how to find resolution to difficult problems. I know from the excellent article in the March Life and Work – the role of the Church in healing polarised division - that many of you feel the same.

Robust and kind engagement is a hallmark of an authentic Christian community. Firmness with regard to one's own position does not mean that one can not be resolutely open to the views of others. On the national stage we are clearly struggling with polarised debate and intolerance. As a church minister, who I admire hugely, wrote: "we need to actively look for ways in which we can learn to disagree better".

I am in no position to lecture coming from the Borders where 'the feud' was once a way of life. My Scott family had a particularly tricky 16th century with the Kerrs, my wife's family. We alternately murdered and then married each other to get through. King James VI strove to get people together in May 1587 when he insisted that the Nobles gathered to celebrate his Majority process up the Cannongate in pairs, each grasping the hand of his enemy in token reconciliation – I am not sure it achieved any more than one can imagine it would now.

But as Christians we do need to think very seriously about those words of St Paul's in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: All things are of God who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation

They are all the more remarkable coming from someone who in his journeying in Greece, Asia Minor, throughout the Roman Empire faced relentless physical perils, abuse and rejection but such was the reality for the pioneers of our faith. In a much more modest way I think our own St Cuthbert, born in Lauderdale barely 20 miles south of here, travelled not dissimilar difficult roads as he crisscrossed the south of Scotland and the north of England spreading the Gospel

Cuthbert became Prior of Melrose in 662 but moved to Lindisfarne, where he died. I am walking slowly the modern St Cuthbert's Way which runs the 60/70 miles between the two. The weekend before last I made the unforgettable crossing of the sands to Holy Island, the Pilgrims Way. I will end later in the summer by coming back to Melrose, across the hills to which I am hefted to the Abbey where my parents and grandparents are buried.

Moderator, notwithstanding the fact that it is signposted, that I thought I knew it, had no need of a Hitchhiker's guide, it is still, in the words of a good friend, a Hidden Way, and walking it revealed many hidden ways. The geographic, - unknown places, communities and characters, the natural kingdom, discovered afresh from sea shore to hilltop. But with long hours for reflection, for me quite different hidden ways through the mind are being revealed, maybe indeed perhaps as they were in the minds of the two Saints who must have accumulated years on foot and on the road much of it surely in contemplation and prayer.

I wonder whether we can learn from these patterns of slower life, whether the opportunity to think – as Paul and Cuthbert surely did -and then rethink perceived wisdom, prejudices, things taken for granted, in private, isn't one of the clues to how we today could begin to disagree better, to discuss our thorny issues. Perhaps your own formative story Moderator living out of your car in Zambia spreading the Word for three years echoes that. If only

people gave space and time to exploring ideas instead of staying on high horses, because in the public square to do otherwise is perceived as weakness, and resorting to insults.

And of course overarching whether we do it is how we do it and what better guide could there be than the words earlier this year of Her Majesty The Queen:

“the tried and tested recipes, like speaking well of each other and respecting different points of view; coming together to seek out the common ground; and never losing sight of the bigger picture. To me, these approaches are timeless, and I commend them to everyone.”

There won't be a soul in this General Assembly who doesn't instinctively empathise with these sentiments but we have to get better at putting them into action. There will be many issues this coming week that cause heart searching and serious debate perhaps quite angry disagreement. I offer my hopes and prayers that you find wisdom, patience, courtesy as you consider them together with the reassurance that, whatever your conclusions, the support which Lord High Commissioners can offer on behalf of Her Majesty will be there, not just through re-affirmation of the Oath but also the opportunities which Edinburgh's Royal Palace provides for bringing people together, in an historic and civilized forum.

Indeed I look forward to welcoming many of you to the Palace of Holyrood house. Its origins as a religious foundation, an Abbey, could hardly be more appropriate. Deeply rooted in our national story are the legends - of the presence there of the Holy Rood, the fragment of the true cross brought by Queen Margaret or of the vision King David I had in 1128 of a shining Cross, the Holy Rood between the antlers of a stag. Even in the 21st century that metaphor for the Cross prevailing in times of challenge, of an enduring and embracing God is one we can all draw comfort from along every step of the road.

Right Reverend in the words of that beautiful hymn We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.”

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: In the name of Her Majesty I now invite you to proceed with the business for which you are assembled and the guidance and blessing of Almighty God be with you.