

OPENING ADDRESS – GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

Assembly Rooms, Saturday 18th May 2024

RIGHT REVEREND AND RIGHT HONOURABLE

His Majesty The King has commanded me to assure you of His great sense of your steady and firm zeal for His service, and to assure you of His resolution to maintain Presbyterian Church Government in Scotland.

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: congratulations on your appointment; a fitting recognition of more than 30 years of ministry in the Church. Well, actually one Church or, more accurately, one Parish in particular. Your dedication and service to your community is remarkable. I am sure that there are many who are grateful you responded so positively to God's calling.

Growing up in the family of a Minister is never easy, having to come to terms with sharing one or both of your parents with the wider parish family. Believe me, I can empathise. I trust that your family will be able to support you fully in your year as Moderator and I wish you all the best.

MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY: please be seated.

Her Grace and I bid you all welcome to this year's General Assembly and thank you for all that you do, most especially in your communities and parishes, but also for giving your time and energy to contribute to the debates and decisions facing the Church of Scotland at this time. I realise that some of you here and others not present have been contributing to the various committees reporting at this Assembly and so I would like to thank you all for that additional time and effort.

There is one person I would like to make special mention of at this moment. Our retiring Moderator, the Very Reverend Sally Foster-Fulton. Congratulations on a wonderful year; you have been an excellent ambassador for the Church. Your warmth and personality has charmed everyone here and abroad and we thank you for all that you have done.

I must confess that my wife and I were both surprised and deeply honoured that His Majesty requested us to be his first appointed Lord High Commissioner and to represent him at this General Assembly. It is also quite possible that some of you are thinking that we may have done this before, a rarity I'm told, among members of the Royal Family. However, records will state that it was The Earl and Countess of Wessex in 2014, whereas this year it is The Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh. An easy mistake!

By the way, Sophie sends you her sincerest apologies that she cannot be with us this morning, but she is travelling to Monte Cassino in Italy to attend the commemorations marking 80th anniversary of the battle there during the Second World War.

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: in taking up this appointment you declared your intention to focus on "*building together*;" a reference, I believe, to a skill you acquired a little while ago. The analogy is clear: you can't construct something unless you work together. We all know only too well that the negative so often proves the positive, and in this case if the builders don't work together then the construction not only takes longer, but also it is unlikely to be any good.

Coincidentally, or perhaps intentionally, there is a link between this theme and the City of Edinburgh. For their motto is taken from the opening of Psalm 127, "*Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.*"

I also noticed that you wish to highlight the importance of people, "*connecting with them, listening to them and showing them that you care, the Church cares, God cares.*" Listening to people and showing that we care is something Sophie and I can relate to all too well. More than once we have met with people who have been caught up in a traumatic event. It's never easy, but always seems to be appreciated.

Sophie, in particular, does amazing work in the field of conflict related sexual violence. It does mean traveling to countries experiencing or recently experienced conflict, which is not exactly easy in the first place, but then listening to harrowing accounts of the evil and usually deliberate sexual violence perpetrated against women predominantly, but also

children and men is challenging. Her recent visit to Ukraine being a prime example. But Sophie has also been to the Congo, Ethiopia, South Sudan, Iraq to name but a few.

Yet even in such places you find sources of hope and kindness. This ranges from professionals, such as doctors, to volunteers who provide support and care. There are also the champions for peace, especially women, who are trying to change attitudes, prevent the circumstances which led to the conflict in the first place from reoccurring and rebuild communities. Taking time, as Sophie does, to listen to those individuals is every bit as important.

In all such cases, we are usually powerless to effect instant change, but that's not the point. We are prepared to take the time to listen and to hear without judging, to show we care. As ministers of the Church, listening could be described as an essential skill, but strangely it's not a given. I think we can all recognise that some are better at it than others, and that we can find it easier to open up about feelings to certain people more. That's not because they are nosey, but rather the opposite in that that they give us the time and space to express our thoughts.

Listening without judging is an especially important skill. It requires suppressing any form of prejudice, bias or preconception. It is important since the outcome is far more satisfying for both parties.

Probably the greatest challenge you, as ministers, face is representing the Church and God when those in grief or strife are seeking answers. In a world where we are often too quick to seek blame, where we are always searching for some rational explanation, some can ask difficult questions of God and of their own faith. In their letter to the Hebrews, the author (who may or may not have been St Paul) tells us "*Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see.*" This, for me, is such a profoundly simple explanation. Putting our faith in God ought not to be about predestination, for that leads to difficult questions when things go wrong; for me it is far more subtle and complex. Critically, when things get so dark that nothing is certain we can reach a place where we dare not hope for something or do not know what to hope for. And when there is no hope . . . well, it's difficult to have faith. The importance of hope or having a vision for what you want to do or achieve or daring to dream should never be underestimated.

For my own part, I want to pay a personal tribute to the Chaplains of the Chapels Royal, especially those here in Scotland. There have been moments recently when I feel I have been lucky to have sensed God's care and love. Who can forget the scenes that followed the passing of my mother?

The outpouring of emotions, the demonstration of respect, love and grief was overwhelming and a privilege to experience and behold. I think I can speak for my whole family when I say that we will remain forever grateful for that support. Coming so soon after the passing of my father, which of course happened while we were still under pandemic restrictions, made everything far more emotional.

I was really touched and comforted by the manner in which the Chaplains made us all feel behind closed doors and away from the public gaze and scrutiny. Yes, I know it's part of the job description, so perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised, yet it's not necessarily what they did, it's how they did it. Here were centuries of tradition, of rituals long practised, of prayer, of care, of comfort.

You and we are the current custodians of those traditions, rituals, values and skills. The world around us will never cease from change, from innovation, from progress. New ideas and concepts will bombard us. Yet, we also seek certainty and continuity. It is a tricky balance to remain relevant or at least to determine how to change and for what purpose.

For the Church, and especially a national Church, the greatest skill is tolerance. How do you genuinely make everyone feel welcome? I am reminded of the story that Jesus told of the good Samaritan. It didn't make easy listening to his audience then and, sorry to mention it, probably doesn't make easy listening to this Assembly given the role of the priest, so I won't recount it in full. But the point about who is our neighbour is well made; that it is not for us to presume or to judge.

If God cares about all of us and Jesus teaches us to do so for all, then it is beholden on his Church and those who work for and on behalf of his Church to demonstrate that care for all. This is not a challenge. If we want our Church to be truly welcoming and our Churches be a living, breathing and essential places in our communities, then they need to be unifying spaces that are loved and cherished.

However, tolerance, like listening, is a reciprocal activity. It requires acceptance and acknowledgement of other's perspectives, knowledge and understanding. Here, then, RIGHT REVEREND, is perhaps how we can build together.

Christianity helped to make this nation what it is. The Church of Scotland has been a critical part of that story for more than 400 years and I trust will be for a few centuries more. Your communities need you, even if sometimes they may take you for granted and not realise how important your role is until times of real need.

We all know that there is a shortage of future ministers coming into the church; it may not be regarded as a normal job and it may not be easy to find the right skills and experience, but then what business out there is normal and which business isn't complaining about finding people with the right skills and experience? The paradox is that the Church needs to be more assertive, yet as individuals in parishes you understand that it is about providing comfort, pastoral care and looking out for others.

RIGHT REVEREND: you are gathered here this week because you care. You care about your communities, you care about your parishes, you care about your church. You have already committed much to both selflessly and I wish you well in your deliberations during this General Assembly. I trust that the decisions you take will serve your church and communities well, but most importantly I hope that you take those decisions with courage and conviction; that through your collective actions you ensure that Christianity in Scotland remains a force for good and an ongoing source of influence in creating an harmonious society.

MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY: may God bless all that you care about and guide all that you do.