

Something to say?

Numbers 11:24-30; Acts 2:1-13

After a week at the General Assembly, I was reminded of the late Duke of Edinburgh's comments on over-lengthy sermons: "The mind cannot absorb what the backside cannot endure." We sat through hours of debate and decision-making. We gathered from the all over Scotland, and all over the world.

The media, despite persistent and continuous press releases from, and engagement with, the Church of Scotland Communications team, nearly always, with some exception, focussed only on stories that could be spun negatively. For a different view you might stay up tonight and watch Sheena McDonald's General Assembly programme at 10.30pm on BBC Scotland (Channel 9).

There were many words.

There was serious talk about the weariness still on the Church after the pandemic, on top of the nervousness, and fearfulness, about the necessary changes we are embarked upon as we reconfigure the number of churches and types of ministries in the months and years ahead.

There was an unsettling report on the centuries-ago involvement of some churches in the Slave Trade, proceeds from which found their ways into church finance in that day, underlined by C21st racism where, in one part of the country, ministers who came from African or Middle Eastern or Indian-Pakistani origin are being passed over by some families and some undertakers in favour of white, Scottish ministers when it comes to funerals.

There was an important Jewish-Christian glossary as our two faith communities thought long and hard about not only what divides us but what unites us in the language we use to describe our faith, our tradition, and our community. Underlined by a power speech made by the Chief Rabbi,

Ephraim Mervis, who retold a story he told me some years ago when I met him. In the book of Genesis, in the parable of Noah, as he sends out a bird to see whether the flood has subsided, the Hebrew word for dove is also the same word for pigeon. The symbol of peace is also the symbol of the messenger. Peace means nothing if it is not spread in a message of hope.

There was a sprightly speech from Dr Joe Morrow, reminding us of the importance of tradition, which had to breathe and adapt, and also continue to make the connection between church and state, keeping doors and windows of communication and connection open in the contemporary world.

There was a powerful debate that almost sprung from nowhere about the Church's position on assisted dying. For too long there has been an assumption that all in the Church were opposed to it, but one young commissioner enabled the General Assembly to begin the process of reviewing that position, recognising that there was a breadth of opinion across the Church. There have been those of us who are in support of a more nuanced approach to assisted dying, with appropriate safeguards, whilst recognising that for some this is not their view. An important step towards an in-depth look at the challenges of this most sensitive of topics.

The Moderator, Sally Foster Fulton, used as her theme, "Remember who you are." Do we have a sense of what our identity is, and what we might need to grow into as we adapt to the demands and changes of the C21st? Are we aware of our roots, and what shaped us, as well as our need to have vision as we revision the future? In her St Giles sermon the Moderator asked us, do we believe still that, "Jesus will come in the same way as we saw Him go – loving, forgiving, healing, walking and working with the poor, marginalised and unjustly treated. (That) He will come in the same way as we saw Him go – teaching us to love each other with no guard rails, to seek unity and peace, not only to seek it, but to build it. Jesus will come in the same way we saw Him go –

breaking down barriers that divide us, upending tables of injustice, calling us into the stormy waters and upholding us there. We don't need to stand looking into heaven because He is right here; lift your gaze to each other and there He is."ⁱ

On this Pentecost Sunday, the day of the Holy Spirit, we encounter the story of the followers and friends of Jesus, gathered together in Jerusalem. Last week, in the story of the Ascension, the disciples looked nervously into heaven, wondering what they were to do next. Jesus had told them to wait for the power of God's Spirit to come to them. On Pentecost the community of believers, women and men, rather than taking matters into its own hands, getting organize and venturing out with banners unfurled, had withdrawn to wait and to pray. The next move was up to God. It was up to Jesus to keep the promise He had made of the Spirit to come. God in Jesus was being held to account in prayer. This defiant hopefulness in those first days of developing Christianity that was the realization that only God can give what the Church most desperately needs. Do we have that same patience, and prayerfulness, and expectation in our Church today?ⁱⁱ

The images used in Acts for the Holy Spirit are of a mighty wind blowing through those first believers, not only ruffling their hair and moving their clothing, but disturbing their thoughts and beliefs, shaking up, and shaking down, their prejudices and traditional viewpoints, beginning to blow away all that was tired and needing to be changed, and stripping away all that was encumbering and unhelpful for the new way God was choosing to move in the world through these surprising, and utterly surprised, women and men possibly gathered in that one place, the Jerusalem upper room where weeks before a last supper had been held.

As Luke's Gospel began with the birth story of Jesus, with the Holy Spirit coming to Mary, so Luke's Acts of the Apostles, the sequel, begins with the birth of the Church, and the Holy Spirit coming to the followers of Jesus. T S Eliot in a poem says, "In my beginning is my end."ⁱⁱⁱ The start of a

person's life indicates the direction his or her life will take. Much that will have significance later can be seen in our origins. The origins of Jesus and the first Christian community are overshadowed by and infused with the Spirit of God. In the story of Pentecost we are listening to the account of something strange, beyond the bounds of imagination, miraculous, inscrutable...no flat prosaic explanation can do justice to the truth of how the church came into being and how the once timid disciples found their tongues to proclaim the truth of Christ.^{iv} The Holy Spirit's power is not always subtle, fragile, or polite. Even today it can be electric, atomic, and volcanic.^v After the mighty wind, the tongues of fire, an image of brightness and light, of warmth, of cleansing, of dynamism. An image of what Christians need to possess. Not only hands and feet and hearts ready for service, but tongues of love and kindness and encouragement and grace because we have something to say. We still have something to say, and to do.

On that first Pentecost that tongues of fire translated into tongues that began to speak so that all the people present, and all the people of the world, could and would hear the good news that Jesus comes to bring. The first followers of Jesus had something to say. And so do we.

Not all will like what we have to say about our faith, and how it speaks to the world. Not always will understand what we have to say, when we share how it is the example of Jesus' life that inspires us. Not all will be comfortable when faith speaks truth to power, as it must to the moral iniquity of the immigration laws before Parliament, or the toxic untruthfulness evident in *some* of our politicians, or the lazy truth-twisting and unaccountable sensationalism amongst some of our journalists, or indeed the nervous reality-avoidance in some churches as we see the present, and future, as they really are. But we still have something to say. We need to say it and hear it from others. And we need to speak it. The people of God inside, and outside, churches still have a voice, and still have something to say, and still have something to do.

The General Assembly, and its people, reminded me of that. Tired, sometimes dispirited, even fearful, we might not have all the answers, but we do have some of the questions. We still have something to say, and our calling, every single one of us, is to speak what we have to say, and do what we have to do. No one else can say it for us, no one else can do it for us. In the time of transition, we find God's Spirit speaking and moving and challenging and comforting and inspiring. We speak, we do, we work, we hope. And we move onwards, step by faltering step, into God's beckoning future, into God's continuing love.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Rt Revd Sally Foster-Fulton, Assembly Sunday service, St Giles, 21/5/23

ⁱⁱ William Willimon, Interpretation: Acts, p27

ⁱⁱⁱ T S Eliot, Four Quartets

^{iv} Willimon, p29

^v Jana Childers, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol 3, p17