

**Sermon to mark the 90th Anniversary of the Presbytery of Edinburgh
St Andrew's & St George's West 8 October 2019**

90 years ago the Auld Kirk and the United Free Church of Scotland joined to form the modern Church of Scotland. On this day, 8th October 1929, the Presbytery of Edinburgh came into being. This gathering is a time to *look back* and give thanks for the work of God in this place, and to *look forward* to set our vision for the future.

The trouble is: it's good to mark an anniversary, but *looking back* can stir up bittersweet emotions: the past may not turn out to be as rosy as we'd like – we might discover just how much the past complicates where we find ourselves in the present. *Looking forward* is also tricky: too much of a crystal-ball-gazing enterprise. I saw an advert for a book on the London Underground the other day with the tagline 'how can you unlock the future when you don't have the key to the past?' I'm not sure we can ever get hold of a key to the past that unlocks the future.

It seems wiser to look to eternal values. I chose our readings from Jeremiah [Jeremiah 1:4-10] and Matthew [Matthew 5:1-16] because they pull us back to constants in God's kingdom that never change, no matter how far and how fast the world changes around us.

Before we come to those readings, though, I have to say that preparing for *this* anniversary made me prick up my ears and notice *other* anniversaries – three within the past week – that provide a foil for today's gathering.

Three days ago it was the 50th anniversary of the first broadcast of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* in 1969. The Moderator reveals in his official biography that he had a walk-on part in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, so I suspect we have at least one Python enthusiast among us. You may not

know that *Monty Python* pushed a devotional programme out of its familiar late-night Sunday slot, and as a result, BBC staff threatened to strike. The Corporation dampened down the row by arguing that the devotional show had been shifted to another time 'to spare clergy a late night on their busiest day'. Gone, let's hope, are the days when the Beeb thought it could win an argument by trading on the assumption that ministers have no sense of humour. But in a small way this illustrates how the Church now sits so differently in relation to its context than it did in 1969, never mind 1929.

Another anniversary last week, on a completely different plane, was the 70th anniversary of the People's Republic of China: marked in mainland China with vast triumphal parades; marked in Hong Kong by protesters, out on the streets with umbrellas – the humble tool they've chosen as a sign of resistance, that doubles for self-protection – calling people to a 'national day of grief'. How deeply contested the meaning of anniversaries can be. One side glories in the past. The other sees only injustice. In his recent Chalmers Lectures, Sam Wells threw out an aside about totalitarian governments acting like swaggering Goliaths, while those who call for justice are like plucky David and his five smooth stones from the riverbed. Then he pressed this image home: the Church, Sam Wells said, loves the story of David but often behaves as if it's Goliath. In fact, being like David, with well-aimed small stones, is a better strategy for the Church here and now. It may seem obvious to say it, but today is *not* a swaggering triumphal parade, however much we enjoyed the procession along George Street. That cairn we built at the front of the church is not a monument to the magnificent past, but a marker on our journey, built of small stones.

The third anniversary is a little more *recherché* but I hope this gathering will appreciate it. Today, 8th October, is the 1578th anniversary of the day when ... the Council of Chalcedon first met in 451 with the aim of settling a fierce dispute over the relation of divine and human nature in Christ. The outcome

(which you will surely know by heart) was a formula which stressed how Christ is truly God and truly human, the ‘two natures existing without confusion, without change, without division, without separation’. An important point in the history of the Church, but actually never a ‘full stop’ in the unfolding story ... more of a ‘comma’. Until the Day of the Lord comes, every event and anniversary can only be a comma in the story of God’s people.

In the flux of time, the readings from Jeremiah and Matthew pull us back to constants that never change, no matter how far and how fast the world changes around us.

‘Before I formed you in the womb I knew you’: so the Word of the Lord came to the prophet Jeremiah. We also are known to God. In mysterious ways, God’s hand shapes our journey. We all have a different hinterland and outlook. But our paths have crossed, at this point in time, to share in God’s work here. And like Jeremiah, we each have our call.

Matthew’s account of Jesus’ words to his followers gives us a prism, a lens, to bring our calling into sharper focus. Biblical scholars write of the Beatitudes as ‘declarations’ made in the tradition of Jewish wisdom literature, summing up key teaching in a memorable form. At New College nowadays we list the ‘learning outcomes’ of every course – the knowledge and skills students should acquire by taking it. If you’ll allow me to borrow that educational jargon, we could describe the Beatitudes as a set of ‘learning outcomes’ ... pithy statements, visionary pointers to ways of justice and joy, showing how life *should be* when we, by grace, learn to live out the words of the Lord’s prayer ‘thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven’.

Following this teaching puts disciples on the same path as prophets like Jeremiah. The intriguing sayings about salt and light fill out what this prophetic role means. (Modern Bibles often put these sayings under a

separate sub-heading from the Beatitudes, but they really belong with them in setting out the values of the kingdom.)

Salt: in places without fridges and antibiotics, salt is vital to preserve food and health – its antiseptic qualities kill bacteria. Rubbing salt in a wound stings for a reason.. In Israel, the purifying power of salt had a ritual purpose, added to temple offerings.

Light is essential if you want to see in the dark. Even a tiny pinprick of light can disarm the power of darkness, and show the way. In Israel, the Menorah – the seven-branched candlestick in the Temple – became a symbol of Israel as a light to the nations.

So when Jesus tells his followers they are the ‘salt of the earth’ and the ‘light of the world’, it brings home the stinging, searching, sacred work of being a disciple.

Nowadays, we don’t value salt and light the same way as earlier generations - even if we only go back to 1929. We try to cut down on salt. Our nights are so brightly lit that we invent Dark Sky Parks as a tourist attraction; most of us carry a torch everywhere in the shape of our mobile phone. But the properties the ancients valued in salt and light – to tackle rot and bring healing – to cast out darkness, to show the way – could not be more relevant now.

Jeremiah was desperate to excuse himself from God’s call: ‘Alas Lord, I do not know how to speak; I am too young’. It is right and proper to be daunted by the challenges that lie ahead. But remember your call, our call. And under the hand of God, who has brought you and me to Edinburgh for a purpose, be open to the Spirit. Find creative ways to bring God’s justice and joy – be salt and light: Amen.