

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen

Sermon of the Rt Rev John Chalmers Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Service of Unity and Common Purpose, St Giles Cathedral September 21, 2014.

Some of the best known words in the Bible remind us that for everything there is a season, and there is a time for every matter under heaven. A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to sow, and a time to reap; today, after such a momentous time, I want to say that this is a time to unite and a time to walk together. The untold energy of people who love Scotland and care about its future has been used up on opposite sides of this debate - now we have to find a way of harnessing all of that energy so that it can be used on the same side.

When the late Jimmy Reid addressed the Upper Clyde Ship Builders in 1971 - as they staged their sit-in - he said to them, "the world is watching us, and it is our responsibility to conduct ourselves with responsibility, and with dignity, and with maturity."

Actually he said quite a bit more than that! But we know what he meant and we know that his words are as poignant today as they were in 1971. The eyes of the world are on us - and it needs to see us conduct ourselves with responsibility with dignity, and with maturity.

Post referendum there are those who are elated or at least relieved, and there are those who are desperately disappointed, "gutted" - is the description that I have frequently heard. Feelings like these will take time to heal and I want no one to think that I think that there is a quick fix or an easy "dusting down". For some, this referendum has been about national identity; for us all it has been about self-identity and that is about as close to the soul as it gets. So recovery and healing is a soul searching matter and for me, that is a deeply spiritual matter - so no quick fix. Instead, it will take a force of magnanimity and graciousness to restore equilibrium to both nation and individuals.

But the economy of God runs on the fuel of magnanimity and grace - and so, today the Church here - along with congregations across the country - is playing its part in making it a little easier to deal with those feeling and in particular helping people to stretch out a hand of friendship to those fellow Scots who did not support the side we supported. How we voted on one particular day does not define who we are. How we work together to put in place what the democratic process has determined will be defining - both for us as individuals and for us as we work to redefine our place within the United Kingdom.

My favourite verse in all of scripture is the one in 2 Corinthians 5 where St Paul describes Jesus as the great exemplar of reconciliation, bringing us back into a

relationship with God; and then he reminds us that we also, are entrusted with the work of being agents of reconciliation.

The way this works is through grace; and grace is that elegant and generous magnanimity which offers us a place at the table which we have not earned and do not deserve. And if we are to be agents of reconciliation then we too have to be generous in the way we include others at the table which we would rather keep to ourselves.

Today and in the weeks to come Scotland needs magnanimity all round and it needs a process for shaping our future which allows every voice, (the 45% as well as the 55%) not just to be heard but to be listened to. This process has engaged those who have otherwise been disengaged and we cannot allow that engagement to evaporate.

The Bible Lessons for today, which I did not choose, but which are the lessons being followed by all of those Churches which use the Common Lectionary, are lessons about magnanimity and grace.

In the Exodus story the Children of Israel have begun the journey to their promised land and they now realise that it is not an easy journey and some wished that they had just stayed put.

But we must not mistake this for a story of misery and grumbling. For it is actually a story about a generous and giving God. It's a story about faith in God's provision and it's a story about believing that, for all our apprehension, God goes with us into the future. Indeed it's a story about the God who goes before us into the future and it tells us that if the people played fair and did justice to one another then they would be provided for and they were.

Likewise, as we look to the future, as determined by the people of Scotland, there will be time enough for fears about the journey, but most poignantly, we need to believe that if we play fair with one another and do justice to one another and listen to the voice, most particularly of those who feel they are never listened to, then in the providence of God we will be provided for.

The parable of the workers in the vineyard is one of those stories where most of us can see the justification for the annoyance of those who were hired early in the day. Why should we not be annoyed when, someone who has done less work than we have - ends up getting the same reward?

The only way in which those who have put in a greater effort (and suffered the heat of the day) can possibly consent to this kind of economy is if they are prepared to set aside their envy and be utterly gracious and accept that this is not about the level of reward, it is about the generosity of the owner of the vineyard. The owner dispenses grace - he gives people more than they might deserve and he calls on others to be just as gracious and understanding.

Jesus description of this grace and generosity actually goes as far as to say that the "first shall be last and the last shall first" and, that of course, is the extraordinary measure of God's love and grace.

Today in Scotland, those who may be feeling let down, bereft, anxious, angry - need to find that on the other side there are those who are prepared to be magnanimous, generous and inclusive in their approach to what happens next. And although it is not possible for the result to be reversed so that the first shall be last and the last shall first - there is an imperative that we make the last feel like they are first. That would be grace, perhaps as close as we can get to the grace of the owner of the vineyard.

Of course, that cryptic maxim that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first", has nothing to do with being the runner-up - runner-up spot means you have competed and competed well. The last in this parable are those who hardly even get into the race.

- The last are women and men, who can see no road out of the poverty in which they live.
- The last are children who endure poverty of opportunity.
- The last are women abused by men who exploit.
- The last are those marginalised by social exclusion, by illness, by advancing years.

Let's make the least and the last the focus of our attention as we imagine Scotland's future.

Around the Mace that resides in our Scottish Parliament are the shared values of the Scottish people - justice, wisdom, integrity, and compassion; whether you saw the way to a better Scotland through the lens of YES or NO - what you saw through your lens was the possibility of extending these values so that ours was a fairer, more just, more equal and more inclusive society.

I believe that these are values of the Christian faith. And light, for me, is shed on each one of these values through my faith, but I will join with people of all faiths and none; I will join with institutions, political parties, academics, the rich and the poor, any who share these same values and I will work for these values by every means possible.

Last weekend as the road to the referendum was reaching its crescendo I had other things on my mind. I had the privilege of being at the Invictus Games. The Invictus Games were the brainchild of Prince Harry who decided that injured servicemen could be helped to recovery through sport and through competition in sport.

Invictus means "unconquerable" and the women and men in front of me reminded me that the human spirit is just that - "unconquerable". But the reason I refer to those Games is because of an iconic image that will stay with me the rest of my life.

Three injured servicemen (one of whom just happened to be my son) raced the race of their lives. As you do in team pursuit cycling you feed off each other's slip stream as you open up a gap on the other riders. These three did this to perfection. Then 40 minutes into the race with Gold, Silver and Bronze assured the bell rang, and all they had to do was race for the line to establish who would be first, second and third.

But they decided to be counter-cultural and counter-intuitive; instead, as the commentator prepared the commentary that would take them to the finish; they formed a line, joined hands and crossed the tape together. These were naturally competitive young men, but they knew that there was something more important than winning. So in the spirit of these games they decided that there should be no winners and losers. And in the spirit of these games the organisers made them all winners and awarded three gold medals - that would not happen in other competitive arena.

Ordinarily no one remembers those who come second.

But that must not happen in the context of what has been the most important, most intense and most significant race that any of us has seen in our time and in our country. Somehow we have to line up now, hold hands and build the future together.

AMEN