OPENING SPEECH OF THE LORD HIGH COMMISSIONER
19TH MAY 2018

RIGHT REVEREND AND RIGHT HONOURABLE

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 must begin by offering the warmest congratulations on your appointment and by wishing you a richly rewarding year in office.

...all have fitted you for this highest honour in the gift of your colleagues. On this 50th anniversary of the ordination of women it is especially appropriate and we pay tribute to the wisdom, the dogged determination which achieved such progress so that today women can be properly and fully at the heart of the Church. That is where you most certainly are, to warm acclaim and I hope that you and Derek find great joy and fulfilment in the year ahead.

Moderator, you have travelled here from far further in the north than I have come from in the south but our converging reflects the great gathering from all corners which this General Assembly represents. You and I have been fortunate in that the hospitality of your predecessor ensured that we became acquainted, in a sense he built a bridge and I would like to thank and pay tribute to Derek Browning who as well as blessing the greatest physical bridge built in our time, the new Forth crossing, has encouraged the building of so many metaphorical bridges, between individuals across Scotland and between peoples further afield. It is your hope, Moderator, that each of us at this General Assembly can also walk together and build our own bridges of friendship in the week ahead. I look forward more than I can say to doing just that and to meeting and talking with as many of you as time will allow.

It is an exceeding great honour to have been invited to represent Her Majesty and to follow in the footsteps of four centuries and more of Lord High Commissioners. The Commission I bring refers in appropriately formal language to Her Majesty being unable to be present – today of all days that surely is understandable. In barely an hour’s time our Queen takes her place as grandmother of the bridegroom in St George’s Chapel. We can all imagine the very human pride and pleasure of such an occasion and we wish the young couple all happiness and health in the years to come.

Moderator, none of my Scott of Buccleuch or Douglas of Queensberry ancestors have been Lord High Commissioners and a little nervously I have to confess that the roles of both in the Covenanting struggles of the 1670’s, The Killing Times in the 1680’s in the south west are not ones to be proud of.

Although I grew up in the shadow of the Eildon Hills in the Borders, an Episcopalian as I remain, it was in the south west in Nithsdale that my wife and I brought up our children.
There our family has long attended the Kirk at Durisdeer and some here will be familiar with that magical space, and its Minister for 55 years, Bill Scott, the best and kindest of men. Each August, Bill held an open air conventicle high on the hillside at Kirkbride to evoke a little of the sense of those troubled times. Gently he encouraged us to share the coming together, the prayer, the sounds of the psalms mingling with the cries of the peewits to listen to the declamation of a haunting covenanting poem, Bury me at Kirkbride, echoing round the valley. Although occasionally we talked history he never pointed a finger, rather he saw these as moments when we could all walk together from whatever our traditions and certainly letting go of past conflict. My wife being a Roman Catholic our spiritual circumstances were complex but he never judged. He was always there for us, writing, visiting, dropping off a copy of Life and Work, even coming to our children’s christenings where he would quietly place his hand on their forehead and say with gentle humour that at least they had now had a good Presbyterian blessing. His example we will never forget.

Moderator, I mention Bill partly to draw encouragement from thinking, wishing, he and Nesta, his wife, might be here in spirit as I stand before you, but also to reflect on the inspiration we draw from those rare people who practice the message of the Gospel in its fullest sense. They may be people we have known or they may be people from the past. Further down Nithsdale there is a memorial to just such a women of exceptional courage, Ethel Walker. This is, in a curious way an anniversary year for her too and her story reminds us that there have always been women who played critical and inspirational roles in our religious life.

It concerned her 18 year old younger sister, condemned to death under a draconian law against concealed pregnancies. Putting her trust in the Lord and having never before left home Ethel walked to London, 350 miles, barefoot, to find and petition the Duke of Argyle and the King for mercy. Some of you will recognise her from this as the inspiration for the character of Jeanie Deans in one of the greatest of Walter Scott’s historical novels, Heart of Midlothian – this small treasure in my hand, the first volume, was published almost exactly 200 years ago in June 1818.

Scott explores the dreadful dilemma which faced the elder sister. At the trial she could have saved her sibling Effie by saying that she had known about the pregnancy. All those around, even her covenanting father are urging the expedient lie, but when the moment comes, it is her bible driven belief that truth must be spoken that wins out. Was she right? How would any of us have behaved? In real life the reprieve was achieved but what if it hadn’t been? Its not easy or clear what the Christian path is and Scott doesn’t help us.

What he does do instead is to arouse our sense of humanity, to urge us to recognise and mind about those who are dreadfully isolated, frightened like Effie in the old Tollbooth Gaol just down the road from here, to walk alongside and for them, as Jeanie did and he did so from a position of deep Christian faith. As he lay dying, this most prolific of authors wished to be read to. Lockhart recorded: ‘when I asked from what book? - He said ‘need you ask – there is but one’.

Our Faith, founded on that one Book, the Holy Bible, brings us together today. As, through the week ahead, you debate important and often difficult issues may you be inspired as Bill, or Ethel were by the words of the Gospel of our Lord. The challenges facing you, our National Church can appear daunting – they certainly seem so as outlined in the Church’s Strategic Plan for the next 10 years – but are they any more so than in centuries past? This is
an inspiring call to action and I pray with you that it may be answered, for the enlightened, compassionate work of the Church of Scotland, present in all corners of the land, is more than ever needed in our fractured and confused society.

May I say that it is striking too for the the way it looks beyond our borders, indeed the very first sentence asserts that ‘The Church of Scotland is part of the world wide Christian Church’. Moderator, you have a busy year of travel reinforcing those ties, visiting many countries including some from the Commonwealth. It is within the Commonwealth family of nations that many millions of our fellow Christians live, some as majorities, some as minorities in their own lands.

The leaders of the Commonwealth met of course last month and we are honoured that the Commonwealth Secretary General, Lady Scotland, herself a devout Christian is with us this morning.

In her opening address Her Majesty The Queen spoke of shared inheritances which ‘help us overcome difference so that diversity is a cause for celebration rather than division’. They are words worth reflecting on and treasuring.

Today, though You, I and everyone here can start as individuals, flawed but with the grace of God, who can heal the wounds of loneliness, disconnection and misunderstanding in this fragmented world and walk forward together.

Each of us has the opportunity and the responsibility to do that and to do so in the light of the Gospel of Our Lord. In the words of St John the Evangelist ‘But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin’.

May His light guide us in all we say and do. 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.