

OPENING SPEECH OF THE LORD HIGH COMMISSIONER

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.

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: It gives me great pleasure to offer you my warmest congratulations on your appointment as Moderator, and to wish you and your wife a most happy and successful year in office. It gives us all joy that the opportunity to serve in that capacity that seemed to slip away from you last year was not lost for ever after all. We rejoice in the fact that you are here before us fully restored in health, and that you are indeed able to bring to the office the benefits of your unique and truly inspiring career as a Minister – the sheer breadth of your religious experience, the generous and open mind that has guided you throughout your career and, of course, your knowledge of and love for the Gaelic language. In electing you as Moderator, your colleagues have conferred on you the highest honour in their gift. In doing this they are not only recognising your outstanding service already given to the Church. They are also expressing their confidence in you as one eminently well suited to give leadership, and to represent the Church wherever you go.

May God bless you and your wife Marion as you enter your Moderatorial year. May you both find much happiness and satisfaction in this very special sphere of service.

MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY, pray be seated

For my part I feel greatly honoured to have been invited to represent Her Majesty at this Assembly. My wife and I look forward to meeting as many of you as possible in the week that lies ahead. We hope to be able extend a warm welcome to those who are visiting the Assembly at your invitation.

It will not have escaped your attention that I am one of that select body of people whose surnames mean something. There have been occasions when it seemed to me that having the name Hope was a good thing. Shortly after I was admitted as a young advocate another young man was admitted to the Faculty. His surname was Risk. Now there have been many distinguished people in Scotland who have borne that name, and as time went on he too became one of them. But I did feel that, as our names appeared side by side in the Advocate's corridor suggesting that there was a choice between Hope and Risk, my name did give me a slight advantage. But it is so easy to make fun of names like mine too.

One of the best jokes at our expense occurred one year when our family went on holiday. As we had no car, this was always by train to somewhere in Scotland. Our luggage travelled with us at the back of the train in what in those days was the guard's van. My father, ever careful, attached labels with our name on them to each piece. So that he could use the same label for the return journey he wrote the name "Hope" in capital letters at the top, and the outward destination at the bottom. This left a generous space in the middle. The plan was to

cut off the bottom and fill in the return address in the space that had been left. This usually worked very well. But on one occasion, on going to the guard's van to collect our luggage, we found that someone had been there before us. The blank space on every label had been filled in. Below the word "Hope" were the words "to get there". "Hope to get there" was a good joke. But it was rather a waste of our precious labels.

It was not until I was a boy at school that I first heard read out that captivating passage from 1 Corinthians, Chapter 13 where the words "Now abideth Hope, Faith and Charity (or as we now say, Love), these three" appear. I was a very small boy at the time – indeed I have not made much progress, even yet. Conscious of my size in comparison with everyone else in the class, I recall feeling acutely embarrassed when the words "But the greatest of these is Charity" were read out. Quite unreasonably, I felt that everyone was looking at me and saying: "I told you so". Nowhere else in the Bible, so far as I have been able to find, do we find that comparison being drawn. The word "Hope" appears at least eleven times in the Psalms, for example. But never to convey the same message.

For a time, I have to confess, I rather resented what had been written about what I saw as my virtue. Gradually however, as I became used to the idea, I began to appreciate that it was not the intention of the writer of the epistle to diminish Hope, or for that matter to diminish Faith either. It is just that you can do, and can say, so much more with Love. Hope, like Faith, is an attitude of one's own mind. In that respect Hope and Faith stand together – they support each other, you might say. What is Faith without Hope, and what is Hope without Faith? Love, on the other hand, is all about what you can do for someone else. There is almost no limit to what you can write about Love. You can feel the writer's enthusiasm as, verse after verse in that remarkable chapter, he describes how Love behaves, what it does and that it never fails. It is only in the very last verse, verse 13 which so troubled me, that Hope and Faith are mentioned at all. As he does not attempt to describe them, the writer simply assumes that we know what these virtues are. But even if he had attempted to describe them, he could never have matched what he had to say about Love.

This is a year, so much more than other years, of anniversaries – many of them to do with war: the battle of Waterloo, some of the grimmest battles of the First World War, the bombing of Dresden, VE Day and the ending of the Second World War after the atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Whatever one's views of these horrifying events, there is no doubt that there were periods when life as we know it in this country was under threat. My father was aged 18 when the First World War broke out. Like so many others he went straight from school into the army. Within a few months he was with his regiment, the Seaforth Highlanders, in France. One hundred years ago today he was in the trenches, having just survived the battle of Neuve Chappelle on 9 May 1915. We have his diary still, written in pencil as pen and ink were not practicable where he was in the front line. He lost several close friends in that battle. When he went out into the open to help a man who was unable to move as he had been wounded, he too was struck. But the bullet hit his revolver which was at his side. It took its full force, and he was unharmed. "Surely God is good to preserve me in this manner", he wrote. He was still alive when the War ended. Had that not been so, I would not have been here now. He survived his war service in the Second World War too. Faith and Hope were very much part of his make up as a result of these experiences, as was Love for others irrespective of who they were and where they came from. Jewish prisoners of war owed their lives to steps he took to protect them from Nazi prisoners of war on his troopship. For him differences of religion held no barriers.

We were so fortunate that things turned out as they did. Quite by chance, simply because I am interested in diaries, I have been reading a book about life in occupied Paris in the 1940s, called “Diary of the Dark Years”. The diary is that of Jean Guehenno, who was a literary critic and a teacher of literature at some of the most distinguished schools in Paris. Interspersed among expressions of his intellectual, moral and emotional resistance to what was going around him, there are vivid accounts of what life was really like in those times when France was under the Nazi occupation and of the reasons to continue to have hope for the future. On one occasion, having listened to a courageous broadcast that Churchill made at one of the darkest moments as Singapore had just fallen, Guehenno wrote “Everyone the world over who is attached to the great humanistic, industrious tradition of Europe through Love and Hope felt himself behind this old man in his London room.”

He was appalled, of course, at the treatment of the Jews. His barber was Jewish, but no longer had the right to cut hair. He was forbidden to conduct a trade that put him in contact with the public. In order to survive he had to go out after nightfall to cut the hair of other Jews in the neighbourhood. But there were curfews, and the most severe and summary penalties would follow if they were breached. Guehenno was not a Jew, but he was frequently called upon to swear on his honour that he was not a Jew or a Freemason. Informers were everywhere, and you soon learned that you could trust no-one. It is hard to imagine such a breakdown of all the goodness that we feel and see around us every day in our own country. That goodness is such a precious gift. But in such a situation it takes only a few to create the conditions where the entire character of society changes.

There are passages of joy too, however, in Guehenno’s writing – of the pleasure that his profession sometimes gave him. In one of those passages he speaks of something that I hope, from time to time, many of you will have experienced too. “There is no greater pleasure”, he writes,

“than to give a mind some confidence in itself. You have before you a little boy who is all tied up in knots, distrustful, despairing. And a question you ask him, and you help and oblige him to answer, or a word from him that gives you something that you can latch on to, suddenly reveals his mind to himself, and gives him the thread out of the labyrinth in which he thought he was lost for ever. And, in fact, now he is finding his own order, his own light. Oh, one does not often have that opportunity! But then we feel paid a thousandfold for the countless hours of work and boredom. Such moments give us the idea of completely pure tenderness, completely intellectual, from mind to mind.”

Of course, it is not just little boys whose minds are all tied up in knots, who are distrustful and despairing. But the fact that there are others, such as you, who can lead them out of the labyrinth where they thought they were lost for ever is a message of Hope, and of Faith too, for the future in which we can all share.

In closing, I know that in the week to come you have many important matters to discuss. Some of them are difficult, and strong and sincere views are held on different sides of the argument. That should come as no surprise. But I feel sure that, as has been your time-honoured custom, your deliberations will be tackled throughout with thoughtfulness and courtesy. In one of the prayers that are said every day before the start of our business in the House of Lords we pray to the Lord for “the uniting and knitting together of the hearts and minds of all persons ... in true Christian love and charity with one another”. I have to confess that, even with the best of intentions, as the day progresses we in the Lords find that

the uniting and knitting together of our hearts and minds, as the prayer calls for, is not always possible. Nevertheless we find, as I am sure you do too, that there are ways of conducting debates which preserve the essence of what it is talking about. So, whatever your differences may be, may you all be blessed this week by the spirit expressed in that other ancient and much loved prayer. May God be in your heads and in your understanding, in your hearts and in your thinking and, perhaps above all because it matters so much, in your mouths and in your speaking.

RIGHT REVEREND MODERATOR: In the name of Her Majesty I invite you to proceed with the business for which you are assembled, and I commend your work to the guidance and blessing of Almighty God.