



KENSINGTON PALACE

Saturday 22nd May, 2021

**A SPEECH DELIVERED BY PRINCE WILLIAM AT THE OPENING CEREMONY OF
THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND**

Right Reverend and Right Honourable,

Her Majesty The Queen has asked me to come here in person to reassure you of Her pledge to preserve and uphold the rights and privileges of the Church of Scotland.

Moderator, let me first congratulate you warmly on your appointment, and wish you all the very best for a rewarding year in office.

You are no stranger to public life, having served the Governments and Parliaments at Holyrood and Westminster with great distinction for nearly 40 years.

In that time, you faithfully represented the interests of your constituents on Orkney and Shetland, carrying the voice of some of Scotland's most distant parts to the temporal heart of the nation. Your appointment as Moderator extends that service, this time to the spiritual mission of the Church of Scotland.

Catherine and I are looking forward to going to Orkney later this week.

I understand it will be the very first visit by a Lord High Commissioner.

I hope the weather plays ball!

Moderator, The Church of Scotland has afforded you its highest honour in asking you to fulfil this role.

You are an experienced Minister in the political sense, but you are only the second Elder to hold the post of Moderator.

I know you will bring a different and valuable perspective.

The General Assembly, and the Church of Scotland more broadly, will benefit hugely from your experience, wisdom and above all - your faith - during the discussions this week and in the months ahead.

Right Reverend and Right Honourable, pray be seated.

One day, it will be my responsibility to swear my own oath to maintain and preserve the security and independence of the Church of Scotland.

This convention signifies the mutual respect, tolerance and understanding that has characterised the relationship between the Sovereign and the Kirk over the past three hundred years.

Her Majesty has always attached the greatest importance to the personal appointment of a Lord High Commissioner each year. It signals the reaffirmation of these values and acknowledges the integral role the Church plays in Scottish life.

My appointment is therefore both a great honour, and a humbling opportunity.

It is my duty today to speak, but equally I am here to listen.

In Scotland this week I will have my eyes and ears permanently open.

There's so much to see and to hear about...

... The way faith manifests itself in people's everyday lives and in the work of the Church of Scotland.

And the challenges and opportunities faced by people, old and young, and their hopes and aspirations for the future.

Over the next few days and in different parts of Scotland, I'll be keen to learn how people and organisations are tackling head-on some of the biggest problems of our time, including mental health, homelessness and addiction.

And you won't be surprised to hear I'm looking forward to seeing examples of how innovation and determined ambition can help find solutions to the global environmental challenges we are all facing on this planet.

Most of all, I want to mark, recognise and celebrate the brilliant and compassionate work Scots have done and continue to do to support each other through this harrowing pandemic.

This work is continuing apace across Scotland as we speak, in order to suppress the Indian variant.

Catherine and I are very disappointed that we will not be able to visit Glasgow this week, where among other things we were planning to host a concert for local heroes at the Barrowlands. We look forward to finding a time to visit again soon.

As we try to emerge from a long period of uncertainty and turmoil, I am grateful for the chance I will get this week to really listen, with humility and compassion, to many people in Scotland, from all walks of life, from different traditions, and from all faiths, and none.

It has been suggested that I take Proverbs 19:20 as my guide – *‘Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future’*.

And, of course, Jesus himself put it more succinctly: *‘Those who have ears, let them hear’*.

I know all of these issues, and many more, will form part of your deliberations in the General Assembly this week.

I wish you all the very best for these discussions and I look forward to hearing your conclusions and sharing some of my own reflections during the closing ceremony.

This year’s General Assembly will feel very different from normal – and it is odd I confess to be speaking into a camera, rather than to the sea of faces that I know would normally fill this hall.

Debating over Zoom of course brings its own unique challenges. But remember Moderator, unlike your predecessors facing a hall full of commissioners, you have supreme control of the mute button.

Along with listening this week, there is something I do want to tell you.

Scotland is incredibly important to me and will always have a special place in my heart.

I’ve been coming to Scotland since I was a small boy.

As I grew up, I saw how my grandmother relishes every minute she spends here.

And my father is never happier than when walking among the hills.

My childhood was full of holidays having fun in the fresh air and swimming in lochs, family barbeques with my grandfather in command, and yes - the odd midge.

I spent four very happy and formative years studying in St Andrews. The town and the students left me alone to get on with student life, allowing me to share their freedoms and their pubs.

I did training as a pilot in Inverness. As well as enjoying the camaraderie of my colleagues, it was a privilege to see the majestic sights of Scotland from the air.

In short, Scotland is the source of some of my happiest memories.

But also, my saddest.

I was in Balmoral when I was told that my mother had died.

Still in shock, I found sanctuary in the service at Crathie Kirk that very morning.

And in the dark days of grief that followed, I found comfort and solace in the Scottish outdoors.

As a result, the connection I feel to Scotland will forever run deep.

And yet alongside this painful memory, is one of great joy.

Because it was here in Scotland – twenty years ago this year – that I first met Catherine.

Needless to say, the town where you meet your future wife holds a very special place in your heart.

George, Charlotte and Louis already know how dear Scotland is to both of us, and they are starting to build their own happy memories here too.

We have no doubt they will grow up sharing our love and connection to Scotland from the Highlands to the Central Belt, from the Islands to the Borders.

I know that for many people across Scotland and beyond, the Church has been an essential refuge over the past incredibly challenging year of the pandemic.

The country locked down, the schools were shut and the economy paused.

National institutions took unprecedented control over our daily lives to keep us all safe.

The NHS has been stretched to breaking point, and up and down the UK people have suffered unbearable grief and a severe test to their mental health.

Yet in the midst of this pain and confusion, it has been inspiring to witness the community spirit sprouting up organically.

Life has become more local, and small-scale organisations have innovated and adapted rapidly to care for the most vulnerable in society.

The Church of Scotland is a case in point.

Shutting Kirk doors during Lent last March must have been heart-breaking.

The natural way that Ministers bring comfort and guidance to those in need was impossible.

Yet local congregations, led by creative and determined Ministers and members, found their own ways to continue worship and provide pastoral support online or by phone.

You have re-imagined yourselves, helping to reach out to those who need it the most....

... Lightening the load of isolation, and ensuring that people are safe, and not forgotten.

So, although it might seem odd to say it – it's almost more fitting that the majority of people are joining the General Assembly this week via Zoom from the comfort of their living rooms and kitchens.

Because that is where the Church has truly come alive during the course of the pandemic.

You have looked beyond the boundaries of your congregations to become agents of support and comfort to your wider community.

You have drawn new members to online services from around the globe.

You have embraced change, and found new life, purpose and energy through your willingness to adapt.

And I imagine some of us will have been reminded afresh that the true power of the Church, and perhaps its future, lies not simply in the Kirk buildings we all love, but in the values of peace, healing and 'love for thy neighbour' that are very much alive in our parishes and communities.

Right Reverend, in the name of Her Majesty I now invite you to proceed with the business for which you are assembled and may the guidance and blessing of Almighty God be with you.