

Opening Speech of the Lord High Commissioner — General Assembly 2022

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: It gives me great pleasure to offer you my warmest congratulations on your appointment as Moderator. I wish you a most happy and rewarding year in office. Appointment as Moderator is the highest honour that your colleagues can bestow. I have no doubt that your prior work as a parish minister in Cranhill, Larkhall, on the Isle of Skye and in the City of Dunfermline, your experience as a prison chaplain and as a psychiatric chaplain, and your work in presbyteries have given you the experience and insight to take on the role of leadership and to present the Church's work both within this country and on the international stage. You undertake this important work with the loving support of your wife, Linda, and the prayers and good wishes of the whole Church.

May you and your wife find both happiness and satisfaction this year in this special work of public service.

Moderator, I feel deeply the honour of being invited by Her Majesty The Queen to represent Her Majesty at this gathering in a year which marks two important anniversaries in our national life. I refer to the 200th anniversary of the visit of George IV to Scotland and, more significantly, to Her Majesty's Platinum Jubilee, in which we celebrate Her 70 years as our sovereign and Her unequalled public service in that role.

The first anniversary is significant because the visit of George IV in August 1822 was the first visit of a British monarch to Scotland for very many years. It was later celebrated by, among other things, a statue of the King which stands in George Street and by the striking portrait by Sir David Wilkie of the King in highland attire, which is displayed in the dining-room in Holyrood Palace. The visit was designed to heal the rift between the House of Hanover and Scotland. It was choreographed by Scotland's great romantic novelist, Sir Walter Scott, who invented traditions in Scottish clothing and created an image of the Highlander as the quintessential Scotsman. Disregarding historical accuracy, he announced: "We are the clan

and our King is the Chief.” I believe that the Ceremony of the Keys and the establishment of the Archers as The Monarch’s Bodyguard in Scotland also date from this visit.

George IV had a reputation for soft-heartedness and amiability but he was in many ways not an ideal role model both before and after he acceded to the throne. The King, nevertheless, re-established the connection between the Royal family and Scotland which was cemented in the long reign of Queen Victoria between 1837 and 1901. That connection and affection for this country has continued to this day.

Queen Victoria’s reign was until quite recently the longest in British history. But Her Majesty the Queen has held the record for several years. The Nation celebrates that unparalleled public service next month.

I was born in the year of The Queen’s coronation and remember as a small boy being very proud of a silver napkin ring, which a kind uncle and aunt had given me at my baptism in June 1953. It had a special hallmark which represented the year of the coronation and I recall being fascinated by that. Her Majesty’s presence as the Head of State has been a constant throughout my life; The Queen’s message of Christian hope, which Her Majesty has delivered each year at Christmas has played an integral part of the celebration of Christmas over the years. The Queen has been an exemplar of the Christian ideal of service and each year has articulated the timeless values for which the Church stands.

It is a great pleasure for me to see you again in the Assembly Hall and shortly, I hope on Monday, to return to this building at the time of the General Assembly. I have happy memories of working here as Procurator to the General Assembly for several years following the millennium and providing legal advice when it was needed on the floor of the Assembly. Fortunately for me, it was not often needed. There were many in the Assembly Hall who knew practice and procedure far better than I. I also have happy memories of later serving as Convenor of a Special Commission of the General Assembly between 2009 and 2011 when I had the privilege of working with excellent colleagues in seeking resolution of an issue which then divided the Church and has created divisions in other churches.

On looking into this year’s Blue Book, just as I used to do as Procurator and, I suspect, as my long-serving and most able successor as Procurator continues to do, I see that there are important and difficult issues for this Assembly to debate and resolve. It is so good, as the terrible pandemic loosens its grip on our lives, to see the General Assembly start to return to its traditional form as a gathering in person of the commissioners where possible from all parts of Scotland to perform these important tasks.

I note that, among the issues which this Assembly has to consider, there is the future structure of the Church. This has been an issue with which the Church has grappled for some time; it has been rendered more difficult by the pandemic. Covid closed our churches for many months. Inevitably there has been reduced income from congregations and other sources. In Scotland there is the continuing problem, which is the legacy of our complex ecclesiastical history, of an excess of church buildings. Social change since the 1950s has created a multi-cultural society both in Scotland and more widely in the United Kingdom in which the voices of people of different faiths and those of no faith are heard alongside the articulation of the Christian tradition. The Church faces the challenge of how best to have its voice heard and to achieve its worthy aims when there are fewer people and less money available to take forward the Church's mission.

But challenges can also be opportunities. May it not be possible for the Church to achieve much with fewer resources if we focus on what we have in common both internally, within the Church, and externally, by cooperation with other denominations, other faith groups, and secular organisations which are seeking to achieve in the community the social goals which the Church has long espoused?

I note also that this Assembly has the task of trying to understand what the Gospel requires of us in response to our developing understanding of the complexities of sexual orientation and same-sex relationships. On this occasion it is a question of how to accommodate different views within the Church in relation to the celebration of same-sex marriages.

These are important matters which may give rise to robust and open debate. It is not the role of The Queen's representative to interfere in any way in such debates. At the General Assembly in the year of Her Majesty's coronation, the Moderator, Dr Pitt Watson, informed the Lord High Commissioner that the ceremonial at the opening and closing of the General Assembly was more than mere ceremonial. The General Assembly, he said, was "the Supreme Court of a Church which is National and Free" and the presence of Her Majesty's Representative was the expression of "the unique and historic achievement in the relationship of Church and State."

I take to heart those observations. May I say simply this? At a time when political leaders in autocratic regimes and, regrettably, in some democracies, have often been disrespectful of the truth and commentators accept with a resigned shrug the deliberate purveying of lies, the commitment of the Church, and other churches, to promote truthfulness in our public and private lives has never been more important. The Old Testament prescription of acting justly, acting with compassion, and acting with humility retains its relevance today.

The Church can go forward without fear. In forging the way ahead for the Church in a much more diverse society than that which existed in 1953, we may bear in mind and take confidence from the comforting words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of St Matthew:

“Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.”

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.