

Address by Her Royal Highness Princess Anne The Lord High Commissioner

Right Reverend and Right Honourable,

Her Majesty the Queen has commanded me personally to assure you of her great sense of your steady zeal for her service and to assure you of her resolution to maintain Presbyterian church governance in Scotland. On Her Majesty's behalf I congratulate the Right Reverend Derek Browning on his appointment as Moderator, the highest honour that the Church of Scotland can bestow on one of its own. It is a mark of the esteem in which you are held by the church and their confidence in you to represent them.

Right Reverend and Right Honourable, pray be seated.

As I reflect on the letter you have received from Her Majesty, I am delighted to report that she was indeed personal – she didn't send me a letter – and I was honoured to be asked and delighted to take up this position. I have been reminded by obviously very good brief and somebody who has been digging around in the archives that my very first visit to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was probably long before most of you were here. I was only 18 and accompanied Her Majesty and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1969, so I feel I have some perspective of longevity, if nothing else. It was 20 years ago I was privileged to be appointed to be Lord High Commissioner for the first, and that was a huge honour, but to do so again is an even bigger honour and I am grateful for this opportunity.

As indeed I had the first time to visit a number of organisations – of course not just closely linked but very much the responsibility of the church through CrossReach - and I am even more delighted to hear that the Cunningham House Homeless Hostel; the Mallard Short Term Residential Care Home for Young People; and the Inverack Residential Home for people with dementia are still going. With the passage of time that I've had since then that's an enormous encouragement, and really important that you managed to achieve that. I'm delighted to hear that these projects are continuing to thrive and meet the needs of the people of Scotland.

I look forward to visiting more church-led projects this week but I also understand that in that time there has been a huge increase in expectation: an expectation of the role of the Church in the community and what you do. But I also feel that expectations should not exceed the ability to provide care, and commitment to care is more than bricks and mortar or online computer programmes and apps. That is what you provide: that personal understanding, knowledge, and commitment of your time and there needs to be space for that, not just the regulation, size and shape of a building.

I also had the opportunity to visit other charities such as the Lady Haig Poppy factory and I know that that continues to provide supportive employment for our ex-servicemen and women and they also provide of course that distinctively Scottish poppy for the annual Poppy Appeal each November. In those 20 years their role and the need for their role has increased greatly with the increased number of injured servicemen surviving and returning home: the needs of the ex-service community have always been different and they are now as great as they ever have been and your ability to support them is much appreciated.

This week also I get to broaden my knowledge of the Church of Scotland itself, I have the opportunity in my travels around Scotland to meet many people who serve the church all over Scotland and I have been very impressed by their abilities and their innovation in where the Church is in their community and how they use and the time that they spend on behalf of others. There is a great need as ever for all churches including the Church of Scotland to offer that hope and leadership. All Faith Communities have a major role to play welcoming strangers: a tradition they have always maintained and is stronger in Scotland than in many other parts of the world. Working together with all faiths and none is important and I know you have chaplains in hospitals, schools and - in my capacity with the mission to seafarers - supporting seafarers in their rather brief returns from seas. All of that is important but the ability to use Churches as the centre of their communities and their activities is evolving and the examples that you set - in providing space for the mothers and toddlers groups maybe; for the book club; for drama; singing; music; for young people to make use of; all are critical to your involvement in the community.

2017 has been noted as an especially important anniversary in the history of the Presbyterian church, being the 500th anniversary of the publications of Martin Luther's 95 theses, widely considered to be the start of the Reformation. From it has flowed so much of the world we see around us at the moment: a revolution that redefined the relations between God and the individual. It's also a moment of particular importance in the history of Scotland resulting directly in the formation of the Church of Scotland in 1560 as we still celebrate today.

As with so many seismic changes – and that was a truly seismic change – the early days were not all plain sailing, but out of this has emerged a new society made possible by the Church of Scotland where the Church of Scotland took on responsibility for the less fortunate in our society. That role continues today with organisations like CrossReach, the Church of Scotland Board of Social Responsibilities and the World Mission Council. I always tend to say on my travels that there's no country I have been to where I haven't found a Scotsman and they're quite often ministers: you've been pretty well everywhere and still are. The Church of Scotland has ensured that there was a school in every parish and education became the norm for all not just the privileged few: I hope some of you have read a book – actually by an American – called 'Why the Scots ruled the World' – that was the reason.

The church helped lay the foundations for the Scottish Enlightenment. We all remember the philosophers Adam Smith and Robert Ferguson but they still influence the way we think. We know and love the writers Robert Burns and Sir Walter Scott – they're still enormously popular. We recognise the architects William Bruce who design the Palace of Holyroodhouse and Robert Adam who designed the New Town here in Edinburgh: buildings we still use the way they were originally designed today. And I would have to include, wouldn't I, the lighthouses designed by the Stevenson family. But Stevenson, of course, originally wanted to build lighthouses as a service to seafarers not as a commercial exercise.

Today the Church continues both its support for the youth of Scotland through the Boys' Brigade and listens very much to the youth of Scotland and I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate Robin Downie on his imminent appointment as the Youth Moderator – that sounds, Moderator, almost more challenging than your job.

Of course, another result of the Reformation is the office of Lord High Commissioner which represents the monarch at the General Assembly. The first Lord High Commissioner was appointed as a compromise to allow the General Assembly to meet without the consent of the Queen, who was then Queen Mary of Scots, but allowing her to send whomsoever she pleased to hear whatever was being said. And that is what perhaps is added to the Assembly, the historical thread of continuity which has been created by that decision and which has been maintained by many Lord High Commissioners who have really appreciated the opportunity to be part of that.

The importance of the General Assembly above all is reasoned debated and that reasoned debate is in quite short supply at the moment and more and more will look to you to continue to do exactly that. It also provides, of course, a direct link between the monarch and the church. That helps to emphasise the role of the Church of Scotland as a National Church which stands for all people. For the monarch it is an opportunity to be well informed about the people in Scotland: both the strongest and the weakest and how you have evolved approaches to both those ends of society.

Since I was here twenty years ago quite a lot has changed, and you can see it here, you can watch it and listen to it. Our technology has made enormous leaps forward that probably few of us could have envisaged and it helps in many ways thought I always tend to ask the question "Is all information knowledge? Please discuss" – ...you don't need to do that. But one definition offered for the difference between knowledge and wisdom is this: knowledge is knowing that the tomato is a fruit, wisdom is knowing not to put it in your fruit salad.

Maybe that technology has also helped to make the globe a little more unstable and more complex but that's possibly because it makes us more aware on a wider scale of what is going on around the globe. When we thought we had enough problems going on at home it certainly adds to that perspective. There are record numbers of refugees around the world suffering from the impacts of both natural and manmade disasters and looking for new lives in new lands. Scotland has always been very hospitable to them and the Church has always welcomed them warmly.

Although you may notice that numbers attending actual church on Sunday may be falling but I don't think that means for a second that there is less of a need for spiritual leadership and particularly tolerance from the National Church. I would argue that need is greater than ever because one of the downsides of technology is that it also creates the opportunity to be more isolated and you provide a network of people who can provide the links - the real human links - between people which the technology cannot do.

You can provide that reasoned debate on the issues that they face. Your inclusive structure is distinctive and it is reflected by your elders and your ministers. You stand for all people, not groups of people. That is particularly important in an age where so many people get labels they don't want and others who try hard to get labels they don't need. I would suggest that the ministers still have a central role to play not just in the community, but outside and on a much wider basis, and they are welcomed when they do. And for this General Assembly which is about reasoned and civilised debate, your reputation goes before you - as it did when I first came and enjoyed listening to those debates.

Your General Assembly this year refers to the Word of Life - that is a really serious subject. I would suggest that the General Assembly is one of the few places that can really use that title effectively and make good use of it.

And so now in the name of her majesty, I invite you to proceed with the business for which you are assembled. May the guidance and blessing of God be with you.