

Abbot Hugh's addresses given at the Diocesan Celebration 26/09/2009

Surprised by Joy Ephesians 2: 13-22.

Here I am feeling rather nervous, more than a little embarrassed and very privileged. It is a privilege to be asked to take part in this diocesan celebration, and more widely in the process which has issued in the Audit just presented. I'm humbled by the spiritual hospitality shown by Fr Andrew and Bishop Mark: to be invited like this into the house of your Church's life.

What we've had presented this morning is the fruit of many responses to a questionnaire. I wonder if it's possible to summarise the many questions into one. If one does, perhaps the question would go something like this: What does it mean to be Christians, to be members of the Scottish Episcopal Church, here and now, in this place (this diocese, this beautiful corner of Scotland) and this time (at the end of the first decade of the 3rd Christian millennium)? What is the way for us as Christians? What way should our diocese take?

At the beginning of his Rule, St Benedict says to his monks: "Let us listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches." That is what you are doing. And today, before anything else, the results of this questioning and listening are being laid before the Lord. It's not the moment for plans of action. It's a moment for prayer and gratitude.

What does it mean to be Christians here and now? On the basis of the word of God we hear today, and of what I know of the Audit, and of my own small experience, I'd like to offer three possible answers to the question. Most generously you have given me three slots today. So, a thought for each of them, moving in some way, I hope, with the rhythm of this celebration.

We have just heard that inspiring reading from ch 2 of the *Letter to the Ephesians*.

In that reading clearly St. Paul has been, in Wordsworth's and C. S. Lewis' phrase, "surprised by joy." The particular aspect Paul is highlighting here - particular aspect, please note - is that the wall of hostility between Gentile and Jew has crumbled, has been demolished by the death and resurrection of Christ. God has brought about a reconciliation where reconciliation would have been, for a man of Paul's background, mentally unthinkable, morally undesirable, and practically impossible. He has reconciled Gentile and Jew. He has created a unity where none existed. Paul calls it "one new humanity", "one body", "a holy temple in the Lord." And Paul is astonished, surprised by joy. Those of my generation and older may have had some small taste of something similar. I can remember in 1972 having a family picnic, somewhat unusually, in a field in West Berlin adjacent to the Wall. We ate our sandwiches overlooked from their watchtower by East German soldiers. Never did I think that in my lifetime that dividing wall of hostility would come down, and - the tragedy of Yugoslavia excepted - practically without bloodshed. Never did I think that the streets of Inverness would be full of Polish people. It still amazes me - a small echo of the greater wonder that takes the breath of Paul away here.

"Surprised by joy." What Paul mentions here, though, is only one aspect of that joy. What any passage of the New Testament mentions is usually only one aspect. And we need to go behind it - to the point of emergence, the point where this joy springs up. The whole New Testament, the whole of Christianity, springs from such a point. What holds the New Testament together is a single conviction. It's the conviction that in the incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit, God- the God of Israel, the God we call Father - has done something new and wonderful. He has transformed the human condition. He has ushered in a new period of history. He has given the whole creation a new hope. "Sing to the Lord a new song; for he has worked wonders." The Psalm has been verified. And we, therefore, have been surprised by joy. We can call it the joy of the Resurrection, of redemption, of reconciliation. Or many other things. But joy it is - the joy, most simply, of the Resurrection, of Christ's victory over sin and death.

Alice Meynell's poem, *Christ in the Universe*, includes these lines:

"Our wayside planet, carrying land and wave,
Love and life multiplied, and pain and bliss,
Bears, as chief treasure, one forsaken grave."

Out of that “one forsaken grave”, joy, as the Liturgy says, “has come to the whole world.” You may know the memorable words of the Russian Orthodox Alexander Schmemmann: “from its very beginning Christianity has been the proclamation of joy, of the only possible joy on earth. It rendered impossible all joy we usually think of as possible. But, within this impossibility, at the very bottom of this darkness, it announced and conveyed a new all-embracing joy, and with this joy it transformed the End into a Beginning. Without the proclamation of this joy Christianity is incomprehensible. It is only as joy that the Church was victorious in the world and it lost the world when it lost the joy, when it ceased to be a witness of it. Of all accusations against Christians, the most terrible one was uttered by Nietzsche when he said that Christians had no joy.”

“Surprised by joy” - like Mary Magdalene and the other women on Easter morning, like Peter and the beloved disciple, like Paul. This comes first. “Surprised by joy.” Am I? Are we? If not, if not as much as we would wish, how can we recover it? Of course, it’s not a superficial thing. In one sense, it’s not an emotion at all. It’s rather something greater than ourselves. It’s something, in the biblical phrase, we enter into - perhaps only slowly as the years go by. But it’s there, and it calls us. It’s in us by the grace of our baptism, by the presence of the Spirit of joy. Its heart, I think, is this: a personal relationship with Christ; a personal ‘knowing’ of him. Without this all our hopes for our Church will be vain ones. With it anything is possible. Above all, it’s by prayer, personal and communal prayer, the steady faithful contemplation of the face of Christ, the harrowing of the heart with the plough of his Gospel, that this joy, his joy, the joy of the planet’s one forsaken grave, will rise up in us and through us and around us, surprising others as well as ourselves. And with this joy, our hearts will be enlarged and become that open, welcoming, inclusive place we wish to be.

To end this first reflection with Schmemmann: “Let us, therefore, forget for a while the technical discussions about the Church, its mission, its methods. Not that these discussions are wrong or unnecessary. But they can be useful and meaningful only within a fundamental context, and that context is the ‘great joy’ from which everything else in Christianity developed and acquired its meaning... And we must recover...this great joy. We must if possible partake of it, before we discuss anything else.”

Dom Hugh Gilbert, O. S. B.

Second Address

Sustained by Word and Sacrament

Isaiah 42:18-23; Hebrews 12:1-2, 14-16, 22-24; 13:1-2; Luke 24:28-34.

Again the question, what does it mean to be believing Christians, Christians of the Scottish Episcopal Church, here and now? What is the way for us?

Again we have the Word of God to help us.

“Listen you that are deaf, and you that are blind, look up and see!” (Is 42:18).

In a sense, not an encouraging start! In these first verses of our first reading, the Lord reproaches his servant, his messenger, Israel - figure of the Church - for being deaf and blind, that is, lacking insight into the meaning of history as given her by the prophets; Israel deaf to God’s word and blind to his glory.

Then behind the 2nd reading, from the *Letter to the Hebrews*, we sense a community making its way loyally enough through this world, but in danger of losing heart, of succumbing to sin, of dividing itself.

And the Gospel too begins from a low point. The two disciples haven’t realised who their companion is, and only a few verses before had come out with their memorable line, “We *had* hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21).

There’s not much sign of anyone “surprised by joy”!

But here’s a first thought from these readings: this low point is always there. At any time in Church history, it’s there. There’s always a lack of understanding, reasons for discouragement, occasions for the pluperfect, “we *had* hoped”. “You find men complaining about the times they live in,” preached St. Augustine once, not without

humour, “saying that the times of our fathers were good. What if they could be taken back to the times of their fathers, and should then complain? The past times that you think were good are good because they are not yours here and now.”

Here and now, for so many Christian communities in the West, it’s diminishing and ageing congregations, it’s a sense of marginalization and irrelevance, it’s a lack of resources and disillusionment with one another. It’s our low point, and low point there always is.

We might think of St. Paul’s phrase, “We do not know how to pray as we ought”, and then widen it. We don’t know how to be Christians and Christians communities as we ought. Or if we do know, if we’ve got the theory right, the practice still eludes us.

“Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger?” That is where we begin.

Then, though, we go back - or rather forward - to our wayside planet’s chief treasure, “one forsaken grave”. We hear that cry of the Eleven huddled in their room, “The Lord has risen indeed and he has appeared to Simon” (Lk 24:34).

How does our mysterious companion, in stranger’s guise, take away our deafness and blindness? How does he, the ultimate Prophet, open the meaning of history to us and allow us to participate in its making? Only he, only the Risen One, can do this.

“Who is blind but my servant, or deaf like my messenger?” In the Prologue of his Rule, St Benedict says, “Let us open our eyes to the deifying light; let us attune our ears to what the divine voice admonishes us, daily crying out...” Where can we find that divinising light, and hear that crying voice? How can the springs of our baptism flow again? That baptism we call an illumination, that baptism in which Christ touches our ears and says, Ephphatha, Be opened!

In the Gospel reading, Jesus heals his deaf and blind disciples by showing how the Scriptures referred to him, and by breaking bread with them. Jesus rescues them from their hopelessness, by *word* and *visible sign* (gesture). Word for our deafness, sacrament for our blindness. It’s in the word of Scripture, however quietly, that we hear the word of God. It’s in the sacraments, however obscurely, that we see his glory. And become again his servant, his messenger, seeing enough of the meaning of history to contribute to it.

How can we be God’s people, God’s instrument of salvation, here and now? Is it preposterous to ask the question? Not if we have been “surprised by joy”. And not - and here’s a second phrase - if we allow ourselves to be *sustained by word and sacrament*. There is, I think, something that emerges from your history, the history of the SEC, from much in the Audit, and from today’s readings, and it is this: *the centrality of liturgy*. If we are Christians, if we are God’s servant and messenger, the pilgrim people of God seeking the City above, disciples on the road, we will be such *sustained by word and sacrament*.

By *word*, we mean above all the words of Scripture, but also, at their level, the words of the liturgical texts and even at times the words of homilies. By taking *sacrament* in the broad sense, we can embrace not simply the great sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, but the whole world of Christian sign and symbol. And in this couple, “word and sacrament”, one flesh as they are, in them we have an immense treasure.

It’s this that, here and now, in the midst of this liturgy I’d like to highlight.

Merely from an anthropological, human, social, cultural point of view, this complex of signs and symbols, words and actions, images and music which we call the Christian liturgy is a precious resource, both for ourselves and for others. And the impressive commitment to communal worship that emerges from the Audit shows how true that remains. I think especially of the power and grace that resides in that annual cycle of feasts and seasons we call the liturgical year. I think of music. I think of the tradition of Mattins and Evensong. I think of the beauty of church buildings, of this cathedral. Easter...

May I insert a story here. Under Communist dictatorship the pastoral and educational activities of the Church in Hungary were severely curtailed. The great Benedictine monastery of Pannonhalma, for example, had its schools closed. So, it chose another road. It annually invited young Hungarians to the monastery for Holy Week

and Easter. And the experience was that, in those liturgical rites, the whole beauty, truth and goodness of the Christian faith could be conveyed, and the life of the Church not just sustained but enlivened and renewed.

How could this be so? We all know that the time and place of word and sacrament is not always a happy one. We know how clerical crassness or the influence of a small group can turn what should be an occasion of refreshment into an endurance test. But liturgy, true liturgy, transcends the limitations we so often impose upon it. In the Gospel, Jesus walks ahead “as if he were going on” (Lk 24:28). The disciples, though, press him to stay. *They* offer him hospitality. Liturgy, in this sense, is something we do. It’s we, in the first place, who come together - whenever and wherever, inviting Jesus to join us. But it is *he* who elects to stay. It is he who takes bread, blesses and breaks it, and gives it to them. He becomes the Host. The liturgy is the hospitality of God, the first of all hospitalities. It is what St. Benedict calls the “work of God” - the work God does. In the liturgy - in word and sacrament - God’s great redemptive work becomes present and continues. Liturgy is - in the form of word and sacrament - the blessing of the Father, the presence of the crucified and risen Son, the activity of the Holy Spirit. It is the presence of angels and the communion of saints. It is the anticipation of the coming of Christ and the transfiguration of the world. It is the most important thing that is going on in the world. It is what holds the world, and us, together.

In the 2nd reading occurred this passage, beloved of John Henry Newman among others: “You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:22-24). This is by any account an astonishing passage. To what, though, is it concretely referring? The best interpretation I have come across is that it is referring to the early Christian celebration of the Eucharist. It is referring to what the Gospel reading refers: the risen Christ among his disciples opening Scripture and breaking bread. And it is being said to a discouraged and harassed minority. It is being said to Christians who had no beautiful churches and who had all the low-level quarrels and even probably some of the liturgical hanky-panky we may have. “You have come to Mount Zion...to innumerable angels...to God the judge of all...to the spirits of the righteous...to Jesus...to the sprinkled blood.”

“Sustained by word and sacrament”. This is and can be us. This is the liturgy.

It is here our deafness and blindness will be overcome. It is here that our low point will become the forsaken grave, and life will well up. It is from here we will gain insight into the meaning of history and become positive protagonists, doing the work of God, here and now. It is here that the hospitable Lord will give us that unity, which will provide a home, a shelter - hospitality - for us and for others.

Dom Hugh Gilbert, O. S. B.

Final Address

Moved by Compassion

A final Reflection

In a moment this inspiring liturgy will come to an end. In a moment the Bishop will bless us. In a moment we will be going forth, if not all of us with a literal scallop shell, surely with one in our hearts.

And once again the question comes, What does it mean to be Christians, Christians of the SEC, here and now? What is the way for us to take?

May I quote here an account of an unusual - one could say, mystical - experience that, during World War I, befell Caryll Houselander, a Catholic laywoman, writer, poet, spiritual director.

“I was in an underground train, a crowded train in which all sorts of people jostled together, sitting and strap-hanging - workers of every description going home at the end of the day. Quite suddenly I saw with my mind, but as vividly as a wonderful picture, Christ in them all. But I saw more than that; not only was Christ in every one of them, living in them, dying in them, rejoicing in them, sorrowing in them - but because He was in them, and because they were here, the whole world was here too, here in this underground train; not only the world as it was at that moment, not only all the people in all the countries of the world, but all those people who had lived in the past, and all those yet to come.

“I came out into the street and walked for a long time in the crowds. It was the same here, on every side, in every passer-by, everywhere - Christ.”

What strikes me about this vision is this:

If we have been surprised by joy, if the risen Christ lives in our hearts - at least if we want him to, despite our resistance - if prayer and a personal relationship with him come first in our lives;

if we are a people sustained by word and sacrament, then this is the kind of vision which we will carry within us.

It is a sacramental vision of the world, of others, of everything. “In Christ all things hold together,” said St. Paul to the Colossians (1:17). It is seeing that.

Pope John Paul II once wrote: “What people expect of a priest is Christ”. But we might say that of any Christian. What people expect of us is Christ, and a vision of Christ.

There is no reading at this point. But I think first of a verse from chapter 10 the Gospel of Matthew. When Jesus sends out the Twelve, he says this: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (Mt 10:8).

That is a commandment of the Lord. How can it possibly become possible? It can become possible because of a verse that occurs shortly before: “When Jesus saw the crowds, *he had compassion for them*” (Mt 9:36).

Any mission - and we are at the moment of mission, of being sent out - springs from the compassion of Jesus. It is the compassion of Jesus. It is the heart of Jesus. And if something of his compassionate heart is in ours, then the impossible will become possible. We *will* cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons - in ways more miraculous than we usually consider such.

There is of course horizon upon horizon here, circle of mission upon circle of mission, a quasi-infinite multiplicity of opportunities and possibilities, gifts and tasks. The introduction to the Audit has touched upon some of them. This isn't, though, the moment for strategy and tactics. And it's not my competence. Yet I can't resist one practical suggestion! It's that Bishop Mark invite to this diocese a religious community - be it old style or new style. It would be, I'm convinced, an enrichment.

Back though to our question. What does it mean to be Christians here and now? What is the way forward in and for this diocese? The Audit will offer some answers. In a way, I have tried to go behind them, to possible sources of inspiration. *Surprised by joy*, the joy of the Risen Christ: let us be that! *Sustained by word and sacrament*: that too. And lastly, I'd suggest, *moved by compassion*.

Christ in the heart, surprising us by his joy; Christ uniting us by word and sacrament; Christ the one we see in everyone, the one whose compassion moves us. I think of the Catechism's 7 corporal works of mercy: Feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, shelter the homeless, visit the sick, visit the imprisoned, bury the dead. And the 7 spiritual works of mercy: Counsel the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offences, bear wrongs patiently, pray for the living and the dead.

When you go back home after this, please don't say, it was a nice service, and then carry on as before! Please let compassion move you to do something new for someone. Describing the taking down of Christ from the Cross, a French poet had the striking line: “Here the Passion ends, and compassion continues.” If we are - as you are! - a Christian community, with a bishop who leads, listens and loves, then this is our task: to continue the Passion by our compassion.

Thank you!

Dom Hugh Gilbert, O. S. B.