

## **Welcome Home?**

The Church is working its way through Lent. Lent is a season in which we try to find more time for prayer and worship, a time to put aside some luxuries and to take up extra responsibilities.

During Lent I stop whatever I am doing at 9.30pm and say the office of Compline - Night Prayer - and then pray for the life and work of the churches of the diocese. As bishop I have oversight and care for them all and of course that is why my particular church, the Cathedral, is also called the Mother Church of the diocese.

That prayer for widely scattered communities finds special focus on Mothering Sunday, the mid- point of Lent, when we spiritually gather under one roof - the Church together as family. That day is also the day many of us visit or contact our own mothers, and even I might manage across the firth to have a cup of tea with my mum!

Sadly there will be a number of people in our communities who might not be able to offer hospitality to their families this time next year, when the proposed Bedroom tax will change the life of many in the highlands. Anyone in receipt of benefit will lose some of it if they have a spare bedroom in their home. This has caused me to reflect on the generations of highland families who have seen their children leave their villages for education or work, young people forced to leave because there is little to keep them but who came home for holidays and for a brief time brought life and laughter back into their communities - they may now find that there is no space for them in the family home.

That then caused me to reflect further upon the nature of the communities I serve; there is no extra social housing in the area, certainly not many with only one bedroom, so not only will the home-comers have no bedroom to use, their families may have had to leave the village or town of their birth. The alternative is to receive less benefit. Surely an injustice when things are already so hard for so many of the poorest and most vulnerable in our society?

The proposed Bedroom tax seems both unjust and unfair - it might work in larger and more densely populated places, but will only bring extra worry and hardship to those already struggling in our communities. If we want people to live in smaller units then we will need to build smaller units, otherwise we must watch as once again our rural communities lose those who most need the care of friends around them.

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