

Sermon preached by the Reverend Dr John Davies during the Consecration and Installation of David Railton as the Bishop of Argyll & The Isles

Wednesday 28 August 2024

Let me begin with two thank yous. First of all, to the Primus and to David Railton for the invitation to be present and to preach this morning. Long ago, very long ago, David was my curate. And I can tell you that he was a terrific colleague. Now David, Sarah, and the family are friends to us. So bad luck. You have me this morning.

But there's a deeper thank you, a deeper appreciation for me to express, and it's for you all. I've been looking into your life as a church, a life that I've foolishly neglected for too long. What I've seen, if I may be very direct with you, strikes me very deeply. My sense is that you are where the Church of England will be before so very long. The integrity of your life ahead of us is a beacon to us in the South. As I say, your life, your way, has struck me very deeply as I have looked into it.

Secularisation is moving at pace, and it shows little sign of slowing. Covid times have certainly added to the effect. For us, south of the border, establishment is fading fast, with its opportunities and its clear distortions. Many, if not most dioceses in the South, are now in serious deficit. We have fewer ordinands, and fewer people are coming to us for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. I sense that we are much less well connected in the South than once we were.

Those of us from the South would have to acknowledge that we do not seem a church tradition at ease with ourselves. We are so often publicly at odds. And of course, religion has become, as a category, toxic, and most people think best avoided.

So, lately, with David coming here as a bishop, I have looked north, and I see that you are creatively and with an impressive integrity well ahead of us. Perhaps your history means that you have never had a distorting sense of entitlement. You've lived so long with a clear sense of identity as a small church, ready to serve locally, yes, but treading lightly in your various settings. You seem ready to challenge or to comfort, but you do not intrude, and you do not presume.

And what treasures there are if people see that characteristic sign outside your churches: "The Scottish Episcopal Church welcomes you." It certainly welcomed me here in summer 1986 as I slipped into this cathedral. I picked up a fresh copy of the blue Scottish Liturgy 1982. As a young curate, I sat at the back and read that liturgy. And I will acknowledge to you that it felt richer, more poetic, freer, and less guarded than the, some have said, rather clunky ASB of the South, where, if you remember, the Eucharist always began on page 119, for no reason that anybody could understand. The Scottish liturgy of 1982 marvellously began on page one. And as I read from page one, as I say, I found something richer, more poetic, freer, and less guarded.

When Bishop-to-be David sent me a draft copy of this liturgy, again I saw a depth and a simplicity and a dignity shining out from those pages, the pages that we are using to

pray this morning. On that same visit in the 1980s to Oban, we saw Professor Donald McKinnon in old age on the esplanade not many yards away from here, looking at the sea and contemplating tragedy and eternity, I should think. He was, of course, the son of a procurator fiscal of Oban, one of the greatest moral theologians of modern times. As he looked out over the water, what could I say to such a genius? So I tiptoed away. He was a proud, declared Episcopalian by deep conviction.

More recently, you've had Professor Anne Loades among you at St Andrews, professing and teaching feminism. And Professor David Brown is now Canon Theologian after St Andrews at Dundee Cathedral, speaking of religion and imagination. How I would love to live in Dundee and go to hear him. Richard Holloway was an inspiration to me as a young priest. Catholic, critical, creative. I couldn't get enough of his books, and to hear him speak was magical.

What I'm saying is here are theological giants, all Episcopalians, and there are surely more that I've missed. I've read, too, online on your Scottish Episcopal Church website some of the current Grosvenor essays. If you've not seen them, they are terrific summaries of basic Christian doctrine as received by the Episcopal Church. So I see the evidence that reflective theology is a lived treasure among you, next to which I would put in brackets that I know that your ordinands are now in the very best of hands. Hands that I know very well. There she is.

Clearly, you value your Anglican Communion, ecumenical and other faith links. You seem very well connected in your places. But you've not been shy in reaching out on occasion to be rightly radical. Your inclusive agenda, while sensitive to the consciences of those who cannot agree, is so very striking to more timid souls in the South. What you've done and how you've done it is an inspiration to the churches and more widely. In the South, we look to you for your ways and your wisdom.

And I could, of course, mention spirituality. But with Iona so close and Bishop's house there, I hardly need to. But there's something more elusive to describe about you as I find you as a church. I've looked into your life, and you seem a community at ease in your own skin. And that is so attractive. When religion in this generation is taken as divisive, quarrelsome, and distorting to the personality and to community, you warm and you reassure the fearful human heart. And so, hearts are drawn in your communities closer to God as fear is excluded and love comes to its fullness.

No doubt afterwards, some of you will say to me in a Scottish direct sort of way: "Well, we hardly recognise ourselves. Like you in the South, we have worries about numbers, finance, and continuity into the future." I'd have to say that that is true of every church in the West and much farther besides around the world. But if, as you do, you have attractive liturgies, theological depth, an easy relational style, a happy deliverance from any kind of pride or entitlement, an inclusive spirit and the kind of outward interest seen in your recent General Synod agenda, quite apart from the fact that you love people and try to love each other and the world, excluding fear, you are surely better set than most churches to face the future.

One last reflection. Long ago, Cardinal Newman, who was a great Anglican who went off to help the Roman Catholic Church in its difficulties, said that individuals and churches have a deep instinct, a profound hunch, what he called an “illative sense” that leads people and institutions to God through Christ and also helps in the making of sound judgments in the light of faith. Your deep hunch, your illative sense, has led you to ask David Railton to be a bishop. And not any old bishop, but bishop of surely the most romantic see in Christendom, Argyll and The Isles.

If you are choosing people like him to embody and incarnate your wonderful and living tradition, your hopes, and your fears, then surely something profoundly of God is at work on this day in St John's Cathedral, Oban.