

21st September, 2014

Reading: Exodus 16: 2 - 15

Sermon: The Way Forward

Last weekend, I was talking to someone I know who had gone with a friend to an art show somewhere in Shawlands. She said they couldn't get near the show because there was a rally on. I suppose that's what you would call it. Every ten minutes a speaker for the Yes Campaign appeared on a platform, spoke for ten minutes and then left allowing the next speaker to take the floor. In connection with the atmosphere, she said, and I quote, 'it was like a revolution'. The trouble with a revolution is that even if at the end of the day a better world is created, there will always be casualties on both sides. There are casualties and there is high emotion. There is fanaticism and there is tension. There is a lot of shouting, not a lot of listening and there are barriers built between different groups of people which are incredibly hard to knock down.

The word 'revolution' instills fear in people but whatever word we use to describe the campaigns which have taken place on the lead up the Referendum, that stage is now over leaving devastation in its wake. Many of the Yes Campaigners are devastated at the result but there is devastation in our country as well and in the wider UK.

I've made no secret of the fact that I voted 'no' but someone said to me on Friday, 'at least you got your way'. But did I? I don't see it that way. What I see is a country which is split down the middle and unrest in the remainder of the UK. I see a union that was all but destroyed before the first vote was cast. That is not a cause for celebration. It's messy and it was going to be that way no matter the result of the Referendum. All I can hope and pray is that both sides of the debate and those on both of the sides of the border will act graciously towards each other and show respect for each other's opinions so that as a country, we can move forward with the minimum of casualties.

The Rt Rev John Chalmers, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, is leading worship today in St Giles

Cathedral. The focus of the service is a reflection on the shared values and common purpose which will unite the people of Scotland.

As Moderator, he wanted to encourage ministers to hold similar services for our own congregations, so that throughout Scotland we can show that the members of the Church of Scotland have committed themselves to pray for and to work together for a future built on values around which there is common ownership and agreement.

He suggested in his letter that we invite some local politicians or campaigners from both sides to enact a candle lighting ceremony in our local Church. This was to symbolise our shared values and our common purposes.

As a national Church, the Moderator thinks it is important that, across the country, we should take the lead in marking the result of the Referendum and praying for unity of purpose as we begin to shape Scotland's future in accordance with the will of the people of Scotland. We cannot let ourselves be defined by which side we have been on, on the 18th September. Instead, we have to take

the opportunity to define ourselves by our commitment to working together to build Scotland's future with shared purpose and shared values.

Politicians of all parties have agreed to attend the service in St Giles' today, when, as part of the worship, the whole congregation will be invited to participate in a short Act of Commitment. In this act, representatives of the political parties will bring forward lighted tapers which represent their commitment to the shared values which are inscribed on the Scottish Parliament's mace, namely, Wisdom, Justice, Compassion and Integrity.

The tapers will then come together to light a single candle symbolising a commitment to work together for the commonweal. We will share in our own ceremony as the sermon draws to a close and we can do that because although we come at things from different angles depending on our views, we do have common values and shared purposes.

We all want the best for the people of Scotland as well as for our neighbours in the rest of the UK. We all

want our country to prosper. We all want to see an end to food banks. We all want to see people in employment and everyone with a living wage or pension. We all want to see justice and none of us wants to see others suffering. We all want integrity to reign in politics and in our own lives and I suspect deep down, we all want wisdom to take the place of political opinion for the good of all.

At the moment we are in a desert wilderness and many are grumbling about many others. There is no point in seeking to blame individuals or businesses, political parties or the financial market. There is no point in seeking to blame Yes campaigners or No voters for where we now find ourselves. We are where we are.

The Israelites blamed Moses and Aaron. 'You brought us to this place, out into this desert, to starve us to death. It's all your fault.' Blame. Blame. Blame. What good does that do? They didn't need to leave Egypt. They could have stayed but they wanted more, just not this way.

Every decision we make, every action and every word we say has consequences. We have to live with them and

we have to move forward to make life as good as we can for the ourselves, for the people around us and for our neighbours irrespective of their views.

God hears our grumbling just as heard the grumblings of the Israelites and his response was to ensure that their needs were met. He provided for them morning and night. He made sure they had meat to eat and bread to satisfy them. He made sure that they had what was necessary to their survival.

If we are to move forward as a people, as a nation and as the United Kingdom, we need to realise that we have a deeper purpose and a deeper identity than that on our passports.

The Moderator, in his letter to ministers, said that unity of purpose is something that, in its purest form, has its roots in our spiritual life and identity and he quotes the following “Quakerism” which comes from the 1916 London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends:

“True unity may be found under great apparent differences. This unity is spiritual. It expresses itself in

many ways, and we need divine insight that we may recognise its working. We need forbearance or tolerance, sympathy and love, in order that, while remaining loyal to the truth as it comes to us, we may move forward with others to a larger and richer experience and expression of the will of God.”

Our sense of wellbeing needs to have its roots in our spiritual life and our spiritual identity. We are all God’s children no matter our views, no matter our political persuasion, no matter where we live or what we do for a living, no matter how rich we are or how poor we are, no matter our culture or our hopes or our fears. None of that matters. all of that is temporal. It will pass but our spiritual identity is with us throughout all eternity. Our spiritual life will continue beyond this realm and we would do well to be as passionate about that kingdom as we are about things which ultimately have little future.

If we get could just focus on our shared values and our shared purposes which result from our shared humanity and from our shared spiritual identity, what a difference

that would make to our world and to our country, to our towns, to our cities and to our villages. If we could shift the focus to our spiritual identity and build on that then even if our world crumbles around us, we will have nothing to fear because the God of Jacob is with us.

Faith is the only thing which no one can take from us. Faith needs to be our foundation because nothing else lasts. Faith takes us to a place where we know that our needs will be met, that we will be fed manna from heaven, manna being whatever God gives us to satisfy our deepest needs in whatever wilderness we find ourselves.

With that thought, let us move to our act of commitment.

I now invite those carrying the tapers to come to the front and take up their positions, to stand for a moment and then to light the candle on behalf of all us and as a symbol of the shared values which are inscribed on the Scottish Parliament's Mace, namely, Wisdom, Justice, Compassion and Integrity.

Lighting of Candle

I now invite the whole congregation to stand and to say together the words of commitment on your order of service.

We commit ourselves, to work for the people of Scotland, uniting to build a better society, grounded in the values and ideals we share:

Let us act wisely:

respecting our differences

healing one another's pain

working together for the common good.

Let us act justly:

towards those who have held different views

towards those who cannot stand up for themselves

towards those who live life on the margins.

Let us act with compassion:

when we see others struggling

when our neighbour needs support

when our rivals are in despair.

Let us act with integrity:

putting the good of others before our own

putting honesty and truth before personal advantage
putting self-interest aside in favour of self-sacrifice
and noble service.

And now as we draw our act of commitment to a close
we say together the words of the Lord's prayer.

Our Father, which art in heaven,

Hallowed by thy Name,

Thy Kingdom come,

Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom,

the power and the glory, forever,

Amen.