

SAINT MUNGO'S ALEXANDRIA AUGUST 29 2021

After Bishop Kevin phoned to ask me to speak at this service, marking the closure of Saint Mungo's, I sat down, feeling sad, and these words immediately came to me - not my own words, words from Isaiah chapter 40:

Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.
Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry
unto her, that her warfare is accomplished...

They were the words God spoke to Israel exiled in Babylon, far from the holy land they adored, the land to which God promised to restore them.

The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in
the desert a highway for our God.

It was along that highway that Israel longed to be taken back home, never again to be exiled. But that's not what happened. The history of Israel was a history of constant loss, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the scattering of its people across the face of the earth to a life of persecution and near-annihilation. Yet their scripture constantly cried out

these words to them: 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people...Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished.'

What kind of comfort is it that comes in the midst of loss and exile? What kind of comfort can we find here in St Mungo's today, when we know there will be no return to this beloved place, no highway being prepared to bring us back home? Today is the beginning, not the end of our exile, so what comfort can we find?

Well, part of the work of comfort lies in gathering memories of our wee church; and it's a story that possesses some endearing contrasts. In a sense, we're coming full circle today, because when there was no Episcopal church in Alexandria, the faithful few in the town were looked after by the church in Dumbarton, which started holding mission services for them in 1877. Then one of those demographic shifts occurred that often alter the course of history. Skilled craftspeople were needed to work in the bleach fields and textile operations that were opening in factories along the banks of the river Leven, and the people who came to fill the jobs were members of the Church of Ireland from Ulster. In 1889 a space to minister to them was found at Dalmonach Reading Room in

Bonhill; and 5 years later, in 1894, this church was opened.

It's first priest was William Hildesley, who reinforced the Ulster Protestant tradition of the immigrants by becoming Grand Master of the local Orange Lodge and practising a prim Low-Church style of worship.

Hildesley must have been birling in his grave 50 years later, when James Alexander Nigel Mackay became rector and took St Mungo's so far up the High-Church Candle it was dancing in the flames. Six candles and a tabernacle for the Blessed Sacrament on the High Altar; sung mass with incense as the main service on Sundays; and colourful festivals to which clergy and servers from other churches in the diocese came in their droves. The poet John Betjeman caught the style:

The fiddle-back vestments a-glitter with morning rays,
The bells and banners - those were the waking days
When Faith was taught and fanned to a golden blaze.

Father Mackay, as he liked to be called, was Irish of Scottish extraction. A graduate of Trinity College, Dublin and Edinburgh Theological College, he was a tall, bony, charming man, with a drink-problem and an outrageous comb-over. But I loved him, and he changed my life forever. St Mungo's was the church the Holloways belonged to, but rarely attended. Then one day my wee cousin died and I was there when

Father Mackay came to arrange the funeral, and he persuaded me to serve at the altar and sing in the choir. A year later he sent me to Kelham to train for the priesthood, where I became even more Anglo-Catholic than he was.

One of my embarrassing memories was of a meeting I had with Father Mackay's successor, Clifford Woodhouse. Mr Woodhouse, as he insisted on being called, became rector in 1951 and only stayed a couple of years. On one of my holidays from Kelham I challenged him for no longer having a daily mass at St Mungo's. When he told me that there was no demand for it, I threw the Lord's Prayer at him: 'Give us this day our daily bread', to which he politely replied that the Lord's Prayer was about real bread for the starving not about providing ceremonial opportunities for young prigs like me.

Woodhouse was succeeded by Joe Wilding in 1953. Joe stayed for over 30 years. A shy, saintly man, there was something supernatural about Joe. He cycled all over the Vale on pastoral visits, bent over an old bike that defied gravity by remaining upright, though it never actually seemed to move. Joe valued silence and reflection and he created the little chapel in the side aisle as a place to go apart and be quiet in.

The years after Joe's retirement saw a series of young, energetic rectors at St Mungo's who all worked hard to keep the place going just when, in the words of the poet Matthew Arnold, 'The Sea of Faith' was beginning 'Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar' of retreat, and churches everywhere started to close, reminding us why we are here today.

I can't name all the clergy who ministered at St Mungo's in its 130-year history, but I want to remember what they did for us. They Christened us in that font. They married us in front of those altar rails. They came to see us when we were sick. They forgave us our sins and listened to our sorrows. And when we died, they took us up the hill and laid us with our forebears in the graveyard that looked down on the factories along the Leven we used to work in. Flawed humans like the rest of us, they brought grace and mercy into our lives.

As these memories crowd in on us, I want to conclude by thinking about why church buildings are so important to us, and why it breaks our hearts to see them close. It is because ours is a religion of sacraments as well as words. There are Christian leaders today who think we no longer need church buildings, because we can listen to the Word anywhere, even in our own living rooms. That's fine for

people whose faith is something they can confidently recite, but it fails those who long for something they can't find the words for. You can sometimes see them sitting alone in the dark aisle of a parish church or cathedral, those sacraments of stone that mediate transcendence, without giving it a name. That nostalgic old atheist, Philip Larkin, catches their mood in his famous poem, 'Church Going'.

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

I can remember another occasion when I went to say goodbye to another 'serious house on serious earth'. In 1930, a religious order for women, called the Community of Saint Peter, established itself in the mill-town of Walkerburn in the Borders, in two large villas called Sunnybrae and Stoneyhill. Sunnybrae was the convent for the nuns and Stoneyhill was used as a retreat house and conference centre. Generations of Scottish clergy did their ordination retreats there, and it was where we took parish groups for conferences and study weekends. It became obvious that the

ageing sisters couldn't continue the work, and in 1976 they decided they had to close. I went to the closing. As I mooned sadly around the place for the last time, I found a prayer card on the noticeboard in Sunnybrae that someone had sent to them. It stuck in my memory. This is what it said:

Look back, remember, and give thanks. The future, like the past, has God in it. God's cupped hands bear the whole of time, and you.

At the end of the Gospel of Mark, a group of women who loved Jesus go to the tomb where they had placed his dead body three days before. They find it empty, and a young man tells them not to be afraid: 'Ye seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified...he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples...that he is going before you into Galilee'.

That is the resurrection voice, calling us from the losses of the past into the future. It tells us that Jesus is no longer here for us. This tomb is empty. He has gone before us into Galilee. We are to look back for the last time, wipe the tears from our eyes, and follow him there.

Amen.