

Sermon by Bishop Richard Holloway for the enthronement of Bishop Kevin Pearson

This text of a sermon was originally prepared by Bishop Richard Holloway, former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, for the enthronement of Bishop Kevin Pearson in St Mary's Cathedral on 4th July 2020.

Luke 12.32

Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom

Sixty years ago, though not quite to the day, on another sunny, summer Saturday, I was ordained to the priesthood in this cathedral, along with 10 others. Many women were present in the congregation of 500 that day, but none of them knelt before Bishop Francis Moncreiff, to have him lay his hands on their heads and say to them, in the words of the Scottish Prayer Book, 'Receive the Holy Ghost for the Office and work of a Priest in the Church of God'.

Given what we now know about the demographics of human sexuality, there were probably about 25 gay people in the congregation that day, but none of them would have been 'out'; nor would any of them have thought that it would ever be possible for them to be married to a same-sex partner here in the cathedral of which they were such faithful members.

Neither of these examples of structural inequality would have troubled anyone present that day, in what was then an institution, like all the others in society, that was unselfconsciously dominated by straight men – or allegedly straight men. On the contrary, most Churches in Scotland at the time would have offered theological justification for that ancient inequality. It was how God had ordered it.

No, it wasn't inequality that was troubling the Scottish Episcopal Church that year; it was something else entirely. 1960 was the 400th anniversary of the Scottish Reformation, and we weren't sure how to respond. For the Kirk, it was obviously a year of celebration. For the Catholic Church, which had been ejected from Scotland after 1000 years, it was a year of mourning. But what was it for us, the Scottish Episcopal Church? We were miserable because we believed that we were the true Church of Scotland, but we had been robbed of our supremacy because of our Jacobite history and loyalty to the Stuarts. Like the Prince over the water, we were waiting for the call to come back and resume our ascendancy. It was sad, pathetic almost, but for lovers of lost causes and failed dreams, it was not lacking in romance, and it appealed to my ardent young heart.

So we didn't do very much to celebrate the Reformation, but Francis Moncreiff invited Michael Ramsey, then Archbishop of Canterbury, to preach to us at a special service here in the cathedral. I can't remember anything from his sermon, but I can remember every word of his text. Large,

craggy and kindly, he filled this pulpit as he leant towards us and quoted Luke, chapter 12:32: 'Fear not little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom' – and a sigh of comforted unreality went round the cathedral. Might not the little flock of Scottish Episcopalians one day be given back the kingdom that had been stolen from them? The problem was that while we might have understood Ramsey correctly, when he seemed to promise us a recovery of status and significance in Scotland, we certainly misunderstood Jesus, because that was the opposite of what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God. What did Jesus mean?

A theological term that might help us understand what Jesus was up to is the Greek word *prolepsis*, meaning to throw ahead or anticipate. Political reformers often urge their followers *to be the future they long for and act as if it were already here*. One way of thinking about the work of Jesus is to see it as the creation of an eschatological community that would live God's end time now. He taught his disciples not only to pray that God's kingdom would come on earth as it was in heaven, but to live *as if it were already here!* They were to be a proleptic community, marked by two characteristics rare in the power structures of the world. The first was radical forgiveness at both the personal and political level, the kind of forgiveness that deflects the harm we constantly do each other by refusing to let it break us apart. The second was to see the world from the bottom up not the top down. God's kingdom was downside up. It was identified with the rejected, the despised and ignored. With those at the bottom, the victims of power; not those at the top, the wielders of power. During the Covid Emergency we have glimpsed that radical vision in action. We have realised that it is the ignored and unappreciated who make it possible for society to function at all. We have been given a glimpse of what it might mean to actualise the downside-up vision of the kingdom of God, to make it come on earth as it is in heaven, where the last are first and the first are last.

The Church, in most of its manifestations in history, has never been what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God, though sometimes it has allowed itself to become the instrument of that kingdom, one of its enabling agencies. And that is its great opportunity today. In its increasing weakness and marginality, it can, maybe for the first time, become an instrument of the kingdom, a broken community working with other broken communities to heal the world.

Beloved Kevin, I know that beneath your confident and competent exterior you are feeling daunted today, called as you are to this new ministry in difficult circumstances and in uncertain times. My plea to you, as one who has known and admired you since I lured you to St Salvador's in Edinburgh in 1987 - where Francis Moncreiff also served - is to make friends here in this friendliest of cities and work with them, not to increase the prestige of the Church but to bring in the kingdom. You and Elspeth have a genius for hospitality and a gift for friendship. Use them; use them prodigally. You will find many allies here in this big-hearted, friendly city, in both its secular and faith communities. Join them in working for a better world. Be a servant of the kingdom.

And have fun!