

WORSHIP IN SCOTLAND IN 1620*

A good many people, looking back over the three hundred and fifty years to 1620, when this church was opened, probably think, 'Now, 1620, that surely wasn't a year when very much happened; that isn't one of the dates I learned at school.' And it is quite true that in Scottish History, at any rate, 1620 is not, in the usual sense, a significant date: it is not a date that appears in the history books, and history tends to be shaped, and sometimes distorted, by what are commonly regarded as significant dates.

The point in time when this church was opened, uneventful though it may seem, was in fact a peculiarly important period. Scotland was not having the battles, murders and sudden deaths, which, then as now, made news and made memorable dates: Scotland was enjoying a period of peace and tranquillity. Since 1603 James VI, King of Scots, had been king also of England, and this meant peace. There had not been an English army on Scottish soil since so far back as 1573, and there wasn't to be an English army on Scottish soil again until 1648: a very long period when there were no invasions from the south. But there was more to it than that. There was also unprecedented tranquillity within Scotland itself. Even in the capital there wasn't so much as a riot, and I suspect it may have been safer to walk the streets of Edinburgh at night in 1620 than it is in 1970. Between a riot in Edinburgh in December 1596 and the much more celebrated riot on 23 July 1637 – the riot in St. Giles which led within a few months to the signing of the National Covenant in this church – between those two riots there stretched forty years of complete tranquillity, the period which I like to call King James's peace, though it extended through the first dozen years of his successor, Charles I. Peace-loving citizens had freedom to go about their affairs.

Peace and tranquillity brought prosperity. Prosperity brought culture. In 1620 two of Scotland's most noted poets, William Drummond of Hawthornden and Sir William Alexander, Earl of Stirling, were producing their verses. While this church was building there had occurred the death of John Napier of Merchiston, who had recently invented logarithms and who was perhaps, among all the geniuses whom this country of ours has produced, the one whose discovery has been most revolutionary and of greatest assistance in

* Sermon preached by Professor Gordon Donaldson, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt., on Sunday 29 November 1970 at the Commemoration of the 350th Anniversary of the Dedication of Greyfriars Kirk, Edinburgh.

the development of mathematics, physics and astronomy among other sciences. And this period, the period when this church had its beginnings, was a period of a quite remarkable flowering of the arts in Scotland. There is still plenty of evidence around us, up and down the country, to show that the Scots of that period had learned to love things of beauty. It was the period of the superbly proportioned and refined tower-houses, like Crathes and Craigievar in Aberdeenshire, the period when a domestic range of surpassing splendour was inserted into the castle of Caerlaverock, to give only two or three of the many examples I could give. If you want an example dating from precisely 1620, you need go no further than Linlithgow, where the beautifully proportioned north range of the courtyard, built on the orders of James VI, bears the date 1620 and has windows with a refinement parallel to those at Caerlaverock. Still nearer home, the sophisticated qualities of Scottish architecture of that period are illustrated in our neighbouring building, George Heriot's School, which we take for granted and never sufficiently admire. Private residences in towns were attaining a new refinement as well. You can see Gladstone's Land in the Lawnmarket, you can see Lamb's House in Leith. All those buildings, and many more, belong to the generation when this church was built.

And there was beauty inside the buildings as well as outside, for this was the period when it became the fashion to decorate the interiors of houses with painted ceilings. A large number of them too have survived, as you see in Gladstone's Land and in Merchiston Tower, the home of John Napier and the kernel of Napier College. I think the surviving examples – and more and more are always coming to light – put it beyond any doubt that our ancestors of that period believed in having their houses a perfect riot of colour and fanciful decoration. The architecture and the painting together suggest to me that Scotland at that time was a light-hearted, cheerful, cultured and beauty-loving place. I would ask you to keep this background in your minds.

When I remarked at the outset that nothing happened in 1620, I suspect some of you thought, 'He's forgotten about the Pilgrim Fathers', especially if you were here last Sunday or knew about the service that day. And I confess that would not have occurred to me, because, I suppose, I keep my eyes too much on Scottish History and forget what was happening in other lands. It was indeed a happy coincidence that it was possible to combine the commemoration of the Pilgrim Fathers with the commemoration of the opening of Greyfriars Church. Nevertheless, I cannot help feeling that the coincidence is a somewhat incongruous one. I doubt very much if the Pilgrim Fathers would have consented to enter Greyfriars when it was opened in 1620, and I doubt if they would have been welcome

if they had turned up, for I am pretty sure that they did not approve of either the government or the worship of the Church of Scotland as they were in 1620. Those of you who have seen some of the painted ceilings may possibly reflect that the Pilgrim Fathers would not have approved of them either.

At that time, although the Church of Scotland had its kirk sessions, presbyteries and synods, it also had bishops, and the Pilgrim Fathers didn't approve of bishops. Not only so, but the Church of Scotland had an official service-book, from which prayers were read in churches. The reading of prayers from the Book of Common Order was a recognized part of public worship throughout the years from the Reformation until the year when this church was built, and beyond it. I don't think the Pilgrim Fathers would have approved of that either. That Book of Common Order had been introduced at the Reformation, sixty years earlier, and was constantly being reprinted so that people could use it and take part in the services in church.

I happen to have in my own possession the edition of that book which was printed in 1615, a volume which was in use when this church was opened. Now, this book contains a lot of things which the Pilgrim Fathers would not have approved, and perhaps even a good many things which some of you would not approve of either. It begins with a table for finding the dates of the beginning of Lent, of Easter and of Whitsunday, showing, for example, that in 1620 Easter had been on 16 April. Then follows a Kalendar which contains some very curious things indeed. We find not only Christmas and the feast-days of the Apostles, but also the Epiphany and various feasts of the Virgin Mary – the Purification or Candlemas, the Annunciation or Lady Day, the Nativity of Mary and even, believe it or not, the Assumption of Mary. It all seems terribly High Church, if not positively Popish.

The book contains the metrical psalms, with their tunes, in the best reformed manner, but after them there are again some odd things, like a metrical version of the Nunc Dimittis and even of what is called 'the song of Blessed Mary, called Magnificat'. There is also a metrical version of the Apostles' Creed. It is quite evident that the men who built this church had a considerable treasury of devotion on which to draw for their worship.

Well, in 1620 this book was being used, prayers were being read from this book. It so happens that we have an intimate description of the Sunday morning service in a Scottish Church which was written about 1620. It takes the form of a dialogue between a 'Catholic Christian', that is, a Protestant, and a 'Catholic Roman', whom the Protestant has brought along to let him see how Protestants worshipped. The Catholic Roman says, 'What is this the people

are going to do?' The Protestant replies, 'They bow themselves before the Lord, to make an humble confession of their sins, which you will hear being read out.' The visitor goes on, 'But what go they now to do?' and the Protestant answers, 'Everyone is preparing (as you see) their Psalm Book, that all of them may sing unto the Lord.' Next the Roman Catholic asks, 'What doth the minister now?' and receives the reply, 'Yonder book which he opens is the Bible. You will hear him read some portion of Holy Scripture.' I think you will agree that this is not so very different from what we have done this morning, just as it was done in 1620.

The Book directs that after the sermon there shall follow a Prayer for the Whole Estate of Christ's Church. It's a very long prayer, and I suspect that nowadays we manage to compress our great intercession into shorter compass. After the Prayer was to come another psalm, and then the blessing, and this constituted the ordinary Sunday morning service.

But this ordinary Sunday morning service was intended, according to the same model we shall proceed on today, to be followed by the Communion Service, which, the Book of Common Order said, should be held once a month or so often as the congregation thinks expedient. Now, I doubt if anyone would say that the Order of Communion in this book is entirely adequate. But it has the core of the matter. The action is preceded by a recital of the words of institution of the Sacrament, from I Corinthians 11, and then an exhortation. Next follows the 'taking of bread' and a prayer of thanksgiving and commemoration. The bread was then broken, and during its distribution there were readings from the Bible of passages relating to the death of Christ, so that, as the Book says, 'our hearts and minds also may be fully fixed in the contemplation of the Lord's death, which is by this Holy Sacrament represented'.

'Represented', yes. But it was more than mere representation. The Book says that in the Sacrament 'we spiritually eat the flesh of Christ, and drink his blood, then we dwell in Christ and Christ in us, we become one with Christ, and Christ with us'. This phraseology was really echoing the words of the Scots Confession of 1560: 'The faithful, in the right use of the Lord's Table, so do eat the body and drink the blood of the Lord Jesus, that he remaineth in them and they in Him.'

Well, this book clearly had its qualities. But it didn't please everybody. There may well have been Scots who were a bit like the Pilgrim Fathers and thought it was a sight too High Church for them, or even that it was wrong to have a service-book at all. But there were also Scots who desired to improve the Book by enriching it. It's at this point I want to recall what I said earlier about the love of beauty which was so clearly marked a feature of Scotland in and

around 1620. And this in itself might suggest that some people would not be satisfied by the services laid out in the Book of Common Order, the prayers very long and tedious and sometimes not too well expressed.

There was a lot that hardly fitted the cheerful, beauty-loving Scotland I have described. Consequently, it isn't surprising that various attempts were made to improve the Book. As far back as 1601 the General Assembly had agreed that some prayers should be added. Then in 1615 there was a proposal for the improvement of the orders for the sacraments, and in 1616 the General Assembly initiated a process of what we should now call liturgical revision, which seems to have gone on more or less continuously for three years and produced three drafts for a new service-book. The general intention seems to have been to give the services a more direct appeal to the people and at the same time to bring the Communion Service, in particular, more into line with what had been historic usage. For example, it was now laid down, in the first of the three drafts, that the readings should not be of any random passages from the Bible, but specifically a chapter of a gospel and a chapter of an epistle, and that the Apostles' Creed should be recited.

So far as the core of the Communion Service itself was concerned, what people had felt to be lacking was a prayer of consecration in which God should be asked to bless the elements and action and to send down His Holy Spirit upon them. Consequently, in the second draft we find a prayer to be said by the minister while he holds the bread and the cup in his hands. It includes these words: 'He is given to us of Thy mercy a food for our souls in this sacrament. Lord, bless it that it may be an effectual exhibiting instrument of the Lord Jesus.' It's a clumsy phrase – 'an effectual exhibiting instrument' – but it shows how clearly the writers had grasped that the Sacrament exhibited, that is, showed forth, the death of the Lord, but that it was at the same time effectual in the sense that it nourished the souls of the communicants and helped to effect their salvation. One point to note about this second draft, from which I have been quoting, is that it, like the first, was mainly a purely native Scottish effort, showing little signs of English influence. The third draft, I may say, showed much stronger influence from the English Prayer Book: but that third draft proved abortive. I am therefore inclined to argue, and it is a thought worth keeping in mind this morning, that, at the time this church was building, the native, indigenous Scottish attempts to improve their forms of worship had reached their peak for the time being. This is singularly appropriate in a church which was the scene of the earliest attempts, a hundred years ago, to revive a dignity in worship which had then been lacking for a long time.

If I may finally return briefly to the Pilgrim Fathers, as a peg on

which to hang my closing remarks. The Pilgrim Fathers, as I understand it, went to America because they couldn't endure the established church in England and thought the only thing to do was to clear out. They were, in other words – it's a technical term – separatists: they wanted to separate from the national church of their own country. Now, oddly enough, although separatism had thus appeared in England at an early date, it did not appear so early in Scotland. Despite Scotland's reputation in later times as the home of schism and secession, the home of division and subdivision among the churches, the Scots were in fact extremely slow and reluctant to accept the idea that it was permissible to separate from the national church.

There was a long period, a period of over a hundred years, when there were indeed both presbyterians and episcopalians in Scotland, but they were still contained as two parties within a single church. The attitude seems to have been this: even if there were things in the national church of which you did not approve, you did not leave it, so strong was the idea that there could be only one church. It was a sin, the sin of schism, to leave it.

One can, I think, illustrate the situation quite strikingly from the early history of Greyfriars. As I said, there were bishops in the Church of Scotland when this church was opened, and one of the early ministers, James Fairlie, who became minister in 1630, was in 1637 appointed bishop of Argyll. Next year, following on the National Covenant, the office of bishop was abolished in the Church of Scotland for the time being, but Fairlie did not on that account leave the church. No, he became a parish minister again, and in 1644 was appointed minister of Lasswade, where he served for a dozen years under the new presbyterian dispensation. This shows what the outlook was in the early years of this church.

Now today I am standing as an Episcopalian in a Presbyterian pulpit, presently I am going to have the privilege of joining with you in the Holy Communion, the sacrament of unity. I can only hope that occasions like this may point the way – I had almost said, and I could quite properly say – point the way back, but I had rather say point the way forward, to a renewed concept of one church embracing men of different points of view and to a renewal of a concept of the unity of the church so strong that men, even though they are not in agreement on all things, can yet be full members of a single church in this land.

GORDON DONALDSON