

150th Anniversary Service MODERATOR'S ADDRESS

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Most of you will know that Liz and I have just returned from a visit to Nigeria and South Sudan. It's hard to reflect on all that we have experienced without having time to process the ideas, concerns and challenges which come to the surface in a trip such as we have experienced.

We were left in some despair at the self-evident levels of corruption in Nigerian public life. It was impossible not to see this, most especially since it is Election Time and some votes are bought with cash rather than won by passionate belief in a political philosophy – and the Church is not innocent in all of this.

Then came South Sudan – and to describe it as broken would be an understatement, to describe it as complex does not begin to express the challenge that this new nation has on its hands as it seeks a peaceful settlement to a conflict which is bitter, political, tribal, primitive and as near to intractable as anything on earth.

But I didn't come here today to the 150th anniversary of the Church Service Society to speak about transparency in government or peace out of mayhem in Africa – even though these matters should weigh heavily on all of us.

But I have mentioned Africa because it is the worship of Africa that has my head reeling, just as much as the chaos of government and the wickedness of the violent conflicts of these developing nations.

In Nigeria we were guests of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria, participating in the commemorate celebrations for the life of Mary Mitchell Slessor. Of our first 36 hours on Nigerian soil we slept for 8 hours, we travelled on impossible roads for 5 hours and we worshipped for 9 hours. The capacity for African congregations to sing and dance their faith is beyond description. I can't describe it as worship that I am at home with – but the point is this – it's not for me; it's for the African culture in which it is set.

In Duke Town, where Mary Slessor began her work and where she is buried, Sunday morning worship was a mere four and half hours! I stood to preach two hours after the service had begun, but no one in the congregation was looking at their watch. Just as I thought that the service was drawing to a close with the announcement of the offering, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria turned to me and said, “this is when worship truly begins!”

He was right; it took the next hour to receive the offering as the congregation sang and danced their way through their repertoire of praise. It was impossible, even for a staid old Scottish Presbyterian like me, to sit still!

Now the real reason for sharing this with you is twofold:

The first - that it impossible to imagine how Christianity could have caught fire in Africa it had not had the ability to burrow itself into African culture and come out of the other side with theological consistency and integrity, but expressed in the context, the language and the customs of the people.

This, of course, is true of the way in which Christianity has found its feet in in many different settings. Now bringing that idea home and to the present day - I believe that there is a very real job to be done (and the Church Service Society should be part of this)

- in understanding the cultural nuances of Scotland today and
- In reframing our traditional statements of faith
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So that they play in tune with the ear of those who need nurtured and fed as they journey in faith in modern Scotland.

Plenty of people seem to be trying to do that for those who might be described as belonging to a “pop culture” – but that excludes many, many others who belong to other of the more subtle sub-strata of our complex culture.

And secondly – it was disturbing in Africa to see and hear some aspects of worship and of liturgical development that could not be defended by any right thinking theology.

For instance – illusions to the way in which God would prosper those who gave more and peculiar traditions in relation to repentance and forgiveness.

I have heard the like creep into church life very close to home – thus the need to continue the work of producing worship resources that are shaped by those who are theologically articulate, intellectually robust and culturally sensitive.

Now hear the Word of God: