

150th Anniversary Service
SERMON
Canongate Kirk, 31st January 2015
Neil Gardner

St Luke 24: 35 *Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

Fifty years ago a similar service of commemoration and thanksgiving for the centenary of the Society was held in Greyfriars and at our more traditional meeting time during the General Assembly in May. Taking part in the service was the then Senior Honorary President, The Very Revd Charles L Warr, who to this day is represented here in Canongate by his Coronation banner above the door beyond the chancel. I say “his Coronation banner”; it was of course to celebrate The Queen’s Coronation that the banner was originally commissioned from the Dovecot Studio to hang in St Giles’ Cathedral when The Queen came there to receive the Honours of Scotland in June 1953. Much is made of that event in Charlie Warr’s autobiography *The Glimmering Landscape*, which was published too soon for there to be any reference to our more modest centenary service, but which contains enough references to the author’s encounters with the great and the good for it to have become quickly and caustically known as *The Glittering Handshake*.

A hundred years and more before all that, in the first half of the nineteenth century in fact, the liturgical landscape in Scotland was neither glimmering nor glittering. It was gloomy! Everywhere you looked it was gloomy. A typical Presbyterian service could last several hours, the opening prayer alone taking anything up to half an hour and reflecting whatever random thoughts came into the minister’s mind as he went along. The whole service would continue in an equally unstructured way, with very few opportunities for the congregation to join in. Hardly any Psalms, no hymns, sometimes no Scripture readings either, just a long and rambling sermon, at least one, maybe more. There was a general avoidance of the Creed and even the Lord’s Prayer, which were suspiciously considered “vain repetition”. It is said that prior to a previous monarch’s visit to Edinburgh – George IV in 1822 – even the Moderator of the General Assembly had to be instructed by the minister of Greyfriars in how to lead the Lord’s

Prayer at a service the King was due to attend. By 1865 things had not noticeably improved and so it was that on the 31st of January of that year, 150 years ago to the day, in a room over Hoods the Tailors in Glasgow, the Church Service Society was first constituted, to “study the liturgies – ancient and modern – of the Christian Church, with a view to the preparation and publication of forms of prayer for Public Worship”. The idea of such an initiative had first taken shape in the minds of two young ministers, of Paisley Abbey and of Eastwood respectively, taking a walk together along the Eaglesham Road and lamenting the deplorable state of ecclesiastical affairs.

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been known to them in the breaking of the bread. The road in question not of course the road to Eaglesham but the road to Emmaus, and yet there too a serious conversation between two men as they walked along, men concerned about the way forward for the Church even on the very first Easter Day, when all seemed lost and hopeless. The following poem, from an Easter anthology, sums up how they felt:

*Absorbed in interchange of faith and fear
The friends move slow along the country way,
Their hope far spent, far spent the light of day;
They scarcely note the stranger who draws near,
And stays to hear their grief and asks to hear –
What ‘tis relief to their poor hearts to tell –
Of Him who should have ransomed Israel,
Torn from the little flock He held so dear.
The stranger hears them to the end, and then
Himself takes up the old assuring tone,
And they become two eager, hopeful men,
And pray Him not to let them lodge alone.
He grants their prayer, and when He breaks the bread
The stranger goes, the Lord remains instead.*

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been known to them in the breaking of the bread.

There are two different versions of the familiar story of the Road to Emmaus in the Gospels, the one from St Luke that we read earlier and one in St Mark.

Except what St Luke takes 22 verses to describe is reduced by St Mark to two verses and two sentences. At St Mark 16: 12-13 we read “Later he appeared in a different form to two of them while they were on their way into the country. These also went and took the news to the others, but again no one believed them”. St Luke’s account tells us so much more than that, and gives us a clear indication of how the disciples and followers of Jesus must have felt so soon after his resurrection. And none of it comes, really, as any great surprise. These two followers of Jesus trudging along towards Emmaus as the sun goes down on the first Easter Day, Cleopas and his friend, absorbed in interchange of faith and fear, as the poet puts it. When Jesus appears and asks them “*What are you discussing with each other as you walk along?*” Luke tells us they just stood still, their faces full of sadness, stopped in their tracks, unable to take anything more on board. Physically exhausted and emotionally drained, they could scarcely comprehend that the events that had so completely dominated their lives these last few days in particular had not affected everybody else in exactly the same way. “Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days? Cleopas asks the inquiring stranger, before going on to tell him all that has happened to their friend Jesus of Nazareth. It was not until later, when Jesus sat down to eat with them and took the bread and said the blessing that they recognized him and realized how it had been him all along, all along the road to Emmaus. “That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem”. The road from Eaglesham to Glasgow is not much further than Emmaus to Jerusalem, and there’s no evidence that our founders walked back with quite such a spring in their step as Cleopas and his companion. But the effect of their encounter was equally galvanizing for the Church Service Society, and if the transformation of the liturgical landscape was a little less dramatic, there is still a sense in which those who in a sense had stood still looking sad, frustrated and forlorn, could now go on as two eager, hopeful men, ready to tell others and prepare for the future. *Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been known to them in the breaking of the bread.*

*He grants their prayer, and when He breaks the bread
The stranger goes, the Lord remains instead.*

The poet’s reference to prayer and to the breaking of the bread reflects so much of what the Church Service Society has thought liturgically important these last

150 years. Like Nehemiah we and our predecessors have sought to bring back the vessels of the house of God, to re-establish ordered and dignified ways to worship, to better enable human encounters – however unexpected – with the divine. And whatever our interchange of faith and fear for the Church we hold dear, today we give thanks for those early pioneers on the Eaglesham Road as on the Emmaus Road, and seek the grace to keep following in their footsteps.

*Each future period that will bless,
As it has blessed the past:
He loved us from the first of time,
He loves us to the last.*

*Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been known to them
in the breaking of the bread.*

And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.