Croick Church – 24th April 2022

It is my privilege to be with you this afternoon in Croick Church; to join with you in worship and share bread and wine with you at the Lord's Table. And I am delighted to bring you the warm greetings of the General Assembly.

Since learning that this service was to be included in my visit to the Presbytery of Sutherland, I have been trying to find out more about this church and the historic events of May 1845. I am very conscious that there will be many in the congregation who know far more than I have been able to glean with the assistance of the internet and Google. Suffice to say that whilst the stories and impact of the Clearances are woven into the history of the Highlands & Islands, there is something very moving and poignant about the report of the Glencalvie women and children – 23 under the age of 10 – who took shelter in the kirkyard, having been evicted from their homes with nowhere to go, and the writing etched into the windows of this kirk, still visible today.

Of the etched comments, surely the one which brings you up short is "*Glencalvie People The Wicked Generation Glencalvie."*

It is troubling that those who were victims of an unjust system should consider themselves authors of their own misfortune: as if they were being punished for their sins. But before we indulge in modern-day complacency, let us recall that such attitudes are not consigned to history. In our own day, there are people who would claim that victims of natural disasters or who suffer from illnesses such as AIDS, have been targeted for some kind of divine retribution. These inscribed words of victimhood must surely prompt us today to proclaim the message that the Jesus whom we worship is not a perpetrator of retribution and punishment but is the Jesus who at the time of his greatest suffering on the cross, spoke words of grace and assurance to the criminal who asked for it, and showed a compassion which extends beyond justice.

One of the other features of the story of those who sought refuge in the kirkyard here which struck me, was that as far as I am aware, little or nothing is known of what happened to them only a brief time thereafter.

Like so many evicted from their homes during the Clearances, they possibly moved to the growing industrial centres of the Lowlands or embarked on perilous sea-journeys to places such as Nova Scotia. They were people forced from their homes by powers and circumstances over which they had no control, and made to start on journeys to unknown destinations, praying, no doubt, for safe passage and a welcome. Sound familiar? As we survey the world today, we realise that the plight of the refugee is not new; and in our response, may we hear the words of Jesus, *"I was a stranger and you welcomed me."*

Pondering on what might have happened to those who initially took refuge here, I thought of the people of Israel who found themselves exiled to Babylon.

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.
On the willows there
we hung up our harps.

How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?

These verses convey to me a sense of longing. But it was to those in exile that the prophet Ezekiel spoke the promise of God, *"I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live."* Indeed, Biblical historians tell us that those exiled in Babylon eventually did manage to sing and are believed to have achieved great literary works. They wrote down and passed down their stories.

Whilst in no way can there be any longing for a past characterised by oppressive evictions from home and hearth, we do have stories passed down to our generation which can warn or inspire: warnings of the consequences of unjust systems; the inspiration of those who, through their witness, have enriched our heritage and given us examples of faithful Christian service.

But be it in country, culture and even church, there can sometimes be a longing to cling on to tradition just because it is what has 'aye been.' And at a time when as a Church, we are embarking on much structural change, and as a country, indeed a world, where the kaleidoscope has been well and truly shaken up by two years of pandemic and today by the sounds and images of a not-so-distant war, it would not be surprising if many feel exiled from a time, not so long ago, when old certainties could be relied upon.

If not 'pilgrims in a barren land,' then possibly 'pilgrims in a bewildering and uncertain landscape.'

The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell recently published a book entitled, "*Dear England."* In the opening chapter, he says it is really a letter to a young lady who approached him at Paddington Station, *"for I saw in her,"* he says, *"something that I see in so much of our culture. She was genuinely seeking for some meaning in her life beyond herself and beyond the things she had already been taught and experienced."*

There is a hunger today seeking spiritual nourishment and fulfilment akin to the promise made to those in exile in Babylon. But our gospel reading today reminds us of Jesus' words, *"I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty*."

And when we recall traditions passed down to us, what compares with what Paul said to the church in Corinth, *"For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you."*

Bread.

Bread often features prominently in scripture.

The Israelites wandering in the desert after their exodus from Egypt were sustained by manna from God.

Elijah, exhausted fleeing from the court of Ahab and Jezebel, asked for his life to be taken away and then fell asleep under a tree. Woken by an angel, he looked round and saw a loaf of bread and water which gave him enough strength to walk for forty days.

The two disciples who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus, recognised their risen Lord when he took bread, said a blessing, broke it and gave the bread to them.

And in the prayer which Jesus taught his disciples, the only material petition is *"Give us this day our daily bread."*

Later in this service, in obedience to Jesus' command, we shall eat bread and drink wine in the sacrament of Holy Communion.

Has it ever struck you just how physical holy communion is? Bread – not just a symbol of life but a necessity for life. To have bread as an essential element in this most sacred act of worship says how much bodies matter and how important feeding our bodies and those of our neighbours matter.

Sharing bread is a communal act. The Latin origin of the word 'companion' – *cum panis* – means "with bread." Unless we act in community, we risk retreating into our individual and possibly selfish worlds.

And ponder further on the words of the Lord's Prayer: *"Give us this day our daily bread."*

It is not, "Give me today enough bread for myself." Like the other parts of the prayer, the plea is in the first-person plural: 'Our Father" "Forgive us as we forgive," "Lead us not, but deliver us." It is a reminder of just how interdependent we are.

Some of you may have heard on Thursday an interview with David Malpass, President of the World Bank. He warned of a looming human catastrophe from a food crisis caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. He told the BBC that if the crisis continues record rises in food prices would push hundreds of millions people into poverty and lower nutrition. He said that this would hit the poor hardest, who will "eat less and have less money for anything else such as schooling".

When we eat bread, both in the sacrament and in our daily living, we surely cannot ignore the plight of our global neighbours, whom we are called upon to love, and who may not know where and when they will next be able to afford or obtain bread.

In a similar vein, the request in the Lord' Prayer is for bread to satisfy our immediate daily needs. It is not to hoard more than we need. Hoarding can be the beginning of injustice if some people have at the expense of those who have not. St Paul had some harsh words for those who over-indulge at the expense of those in need,

"For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. What! Do you not have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?"

So, bread, its availability and its distribution can become a litmus test of justice.

I recently came across a verse of a hymn from a Lutheran hymnbook which powerfully captures this idea:

Across the world, across the street,
the victims of injustice cry
for shelter and for bread to eat,
and never live before they die.

And it is followed by a refrain:

Then let the servant church arise,
a caring church that longs to be
a partner in Christ's sacrifice,
and clothed in Christ's humanity.

The line about victims who "never live before they die", immediately brought to mind the Christian Aid slogan, *"We believe in life before death."* That is a call to act as a servant church and a caring church.

As Easter people, who rejoice in the reality of our risen Lord, surely, we must be committed to our world, to all its people and to a table where we all can sit down together and share in what God has provided.

In the passage from John's gospel, which we have read, Jesus recalls the story, handed down, of how their ancestors ate manna in the wilderness. And he says that, *"It was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but it is my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."*

Whereas the bread given in the wilderness is historic, the bread of God which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world is immediate and present. If today, in 2022, Jesus is the living bread, then we, through our actions, must be the sources of that fresh and living bread which nourishes, both physically and spiritually, a world yearning to be filled. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsay said,

"It's not what we make of the eucharist that matters, but what the eucharist is making of us."

Our prayer is that we will rise from the table, sustained by bread and wine, ready to go out and make a difference in the world.