

I'm glad to be here this morning to preach on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the ordination of your minister Neil Gardner, not least because he deserves a rest after his arduous week at the General Assembly as chaplain to the Lord High Commissioner. You realise you're getting on a bit when former students start to hit these landmarks, though it doesn't seem so long ago that Neil was a BD student at New College. And unlike some of his fellow students and his teachers, he hasn't really aged in the intervening years.

I remember him as a gifted musician who played both the piano and organ for College worship and also as an engaged student in my class on Scottish Theology, one of my favourite subjects. When I left for Aberdeen at the end of the spring term in 1990, the students sang a mock metrical Psalm in my honour to the tune of St Paul Aberdeen. As I recall, they sang it rather well in four-part harmony, and gave me the hymn sheet as a gift. I've kept it in my file all these years, and since I see that it bears your minister's signature, he can't deny authorship. It's actually quite good. 'Now as we end our psalm of praise, We wish thee all delights. Under the crown of King's that stands. Beneath the Northern Lights.'

Our paths have crossed in different ways over the years, reminding us of the cross currents of church and national life. Ours is a small world. Neil was attached to Mayfield Church with Bill McDonald where I also served as a student some years earlier. He was ordained at New Kilpatrick in Bearsden where I grew up and where some of my family remain in membership. He served as an army chaplain and we met in London where my father-in-law was minister at St Columba's Pont Street. He was parish minister in Alyth for 7 years where one of my own teachers and predecessors, Tom Torrance, had been minister. And now we're both back in Edinburgh where it is good to see him exercising a leading role in church, parish and national life.

This traversing of place, walks of life and social boundaries remains one of the great privileges of ministry in the Church of Scotland. The range of locations and types of people you encounter is seldom matched in other professions, and we should be grateful for a church and a ministry that has that wide reach. It ought to be a good selling point in our recruitment campaign at a time of chronic ministerial shortage. And maybe there's someone in church today who might consider whether they too have a vocation to this ministry of word and sacrament which we celebrate today. Enriching and stimulating, the ministry also takes us outside our comfort zones, alerting us to circumstances and situations that are different and sometimes much harder than our own. At a time of reduced numbers and shrinkage, I believe that it remains important for the

Kirk to maintain this reach and to avoid confinement to a single type of congregation or ministry or church life. And let's hope and pray that Neil Gardner will continue to show us this way through the next 25 years of his ministry.

Our gospel reading takes us to the midst of Jesus' ministry in Galilee – to Capernaum which was a focus for much of his work. Here we witness the crossing of ethnic, social and religious boundaries in ways that foreshadow the later life of the church in the Graeco-Roman empire. Seeking Jesus' help, a Roman centurion asks some Jewish elders to intercede so that his desperately ill slave might be healed. If you've been to Capernaum on the shores of the lake and seen the remains of the synagogue there, you can perhaps picture the scene. Note the different relationships through which these negotiations take place. The Jewish elders approach Jesus – there is no antagonism here. They represent the Roman centurion – he is one of the righteous amongst the Gentiles who has built their synagogue. The centurion is a man of some power and authority, but he expresses concern for a beloved slave. It's a complex network in which power and status are represented, but in each of these transactions there is a unity of purpose and goodwill. I'd like to focus on three features – faith, humility and mediation.

The story is first and foremost an episode of faith – the centurion is one of the heathen, yet he turns to Jesus in his hour of need. Just speak the word, he says, and let my servant be healed. Even Jesus is amazed. 'Not even in Israel, have I found such faith.' In miniature, this incident reveals something of the surprising and spontaneous combustion of faith in human lives. We find it where we least expect it, whether in our own lives or in those around us. I recently worked with a colleague from the university in organizing a series of public lectures. She was her usual efficient self and asked me at the end of the fortnight how I felt the lectures had gone. After I'd commented favourably, I asked her for her own impressions of the arrangements. I was surprised when she quietly said that she'd never heard anyone speak so openly about God's grace. 'It made me feel like dancing', she said. Surely, that's the gift of faith, the work of the Holy Spirit in us. In her poem on 'Prayer', Carol Ann Duffy writes:

'Some nights, when we are faithless, the truth enters our hearts, that small familiar pain. Then a man will stand stock-still hearing his youth in the distant Latin chanting of a train.'

The lesson of church history is that Christian faith often spreads in surprising and unpredictable ways like the winds across the globe. Perhaps we have to say the same of its decline. Always there are ebbs and flows, losses and gains,

troughs as well as peaks; this too is the story of the history of Israel in the Old Testament. It seems that it was never the will of God that the whole world should believe all at once. And yet God's grace continue to ambush us when least we expect it. Having churches which are sufficiently open and receptive to that possibility is our task.

And here the humility of the centurion may also have something to teach us – our second feature. Note how he doesn't presume to come to Jesus directly. He asks the Jewish elders to intervene on his behalf. Nor does he expect Jesus to come under his roof and so to risk embarrassment by being hosted at a Gentile establishment. I do not presume, he says – just say the word.

As a church, we need to learn humility – perhaps this is a particular burden placed upon a national church that has entered a phase of rapid retrenchment. Our humility may have to take the form of patience accompanied by that old Protestant virtue perseverance, perhaps laced with a little more humour than abounded in our church life in earlier ages. We should avoid becoming over-anxious about our strategies and techniques of mission and evangelism, as if we are required to discover the winning formula that will bring back large sectors of the population to the religion that they have abandoned. In the end it will come down to the Holy Spirit and not to us. This should keep us patient and cheerful in our work. It's no bad thing to be cut down to size now and again. Last year, The Evening News reported my service of installation to the Chapel Royal with a headline about a professor becoming a Queen's chaplain. Unfortunately, 'chaplain' was spelt 'chaplin' as in Charlie Chaplin which generated some amusement amongst my students. An enforced humility may serve us quite well at times.

The gospel story ends with healing and restoration. 'Only speak the word and let my servant be healed.' These words have been adapted into some communion liturgies and they touch the depths of our common human experience. The desire for healing runs through each one of us. It is felt across the same boundaries of status, power, race and religion. Our common need equalises us in the community of faith - a point that Paul insists upon again and again. 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body.'

But the point I wish to make in closing is that Jesus' act of healing is communicated through others – here it is mediated, as it is elsewhere. Note that the centurion and Jesus never actually meet. He does not presume to come to Jesus directly but instead asks the Jewish elders and then his friends to intercede for him. Without the action of other people, he would never have made his way to Christ. His beloved servant would have remained sick to the point of death.

There would be no faith celebrated outside Israel except through the elders of the Jews and those unnamed and unnumbered friends.

And finally this morning we catch a glimpse of why we need a church and its pastoral leaders. Without the ministrations of the church, there is no other way in which the healing power of Jesus can be manifest in the world. For all its failings and its crisis of recruitment, the church is all that we have. Without it, there is no ministry of word and sacrament, and so no presentation of Christ and his gospel. So let us not lament our failings and crises, but instead on this jubilee occasion let us celebrate the ministry to which God always calls men and women and which continues to flourish in and beyond this congregation. Thanks be to God.