

Sunday 3rd July 2016, Sixth after Trinity; Canongate Kirk.

In the presence of HM The Queen and HRH The Duke of Edinburgh.

Galatians 6: 9 *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.*

Until recently the Scottish National Portrait Gallery ran an exhibition entitled “Remembering the Great War”, which featured a number of portraits of prominent Scots involved directly or indirectly with the conflict that has already been the subject of a number of centenary commemorations and not least in recent days and weeks. Some portraits were to be expected – Field Marshall Douglas Haig, for instance, who was born at Charlotte Square and buried at Dryburgh Abbey; and Elsie Inglis, who in 1914 founded the Scottish Women’s Hospitals for Foreign Services, supplying doctors and nurses, ambulance drivers and orderlies to the Western Front. Those who suffered personal losses were included too: JM Barrie from Kirriemuir, the author of Peter Pan, who lost an adoptive son in Flanders; Sir George Browne, the Scottish architect who designed amongst other Edinburgh landmarks the Royal Hospital for Sick Children, the Central Library on George IV Bridge, and the King Edward VII Memorial Gates at the Palace of Holyroodhouse – Browne lost three sons in the Great War, including one with The Black Watch at the Battle of Loos, and one with The Royal Scots on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 1st July 1916; but finally, and most unexpectedly for me, Sir Harry Lauder from Portobello who lost his only son John, a captain serving with the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, in 1916.

In his memoir called “A Minstrel in France”, Harry Lauder recalls the moment he visited his son’s grave for the first time, during a morale-raising and ground-breaking tour of the troops while war was still raging. “My own grief”, he writes, “was altered by the vision of the grief that had come to so many others. Those crosses, stretching away as far as my eye could reach, attested to the fact that it was not I alone who had suffered and lost and laid a sacrifice upon the altar of my country. And in the presence of so many evidences of grief and desolation a private grief sank into its true proportions. It was no less keen, the agony of the thought of my boy was as sharp as ever. But I knew that he was only one, and that I was only one father. And there were so many like him, and so many like me, God help us all.” He goes on to write of the strength that he found through faith, of his sense of God’s help right enough. But most remarkably of all he went on to write one of his most famous songs in response to his son’s death, a song neither of lament nor regret, but one of encouragement and determination, Keep right on to the end of the road. Now don’t worry, I’m not going to sing it, but if I read some of the words those of a certain age will probably hear Harry Lauder’s distinctive voice behind them.

*Keep right on to the end of the road,
Keep right on to the end,
Tho' the way be long, let your heart be strong,
Keep right on round the bend.
Tho' you're tired and weary still journey on,
Till you come to your happy abode,
Where all the love you've been dreaming of
Will be there at the end of the road.*

It's perhaps a timely reminder that with both the centenary of the Battle of Jutland behind us and most recently the outbreak of the Battle of the Somme, there is still a long way to go in the national programme of commemorations, I suppose we're about half way through, as they were without knowing it a hundred years ago. There was a long way still to go. Keep right on to the end of the road. Many of those soldiers who survived the slaughter of the first day of the Battle of the Somme would come in time to be familiar with Harry Lauder's songs. Fewer I suspect would ever be familiar with the words of St Paul's Letter to the Galatians, but there too they would have found a source of encouragement to keep going, not least in the ninth verse of the sixth chapter, *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.* The churches in Galatia, a Roman province in Asia Minor, were struggling to balance their new faith in Jesus Christ with the old reliance on the law of Moses, and Paul was anxious that they should not be led astray by false teaching, but should stick resolutely to the course on which they had embarked, a course he shares even from a distance. *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.* The instruction to Christian perseverance had already been given by Jesus in his appointment of the seventy others "sent on ahead of him in pairs," as St Luke's Gospel puts it in the other reading set by the lectionary for today, "sent on ahead...to every town and place where Jesus himself intended to go." Keep right on to the end of the road. But the example of Christian perseverance had already been set by Jesus, who sent those seventy on their way like himself, vulnerable and disadvantaged, like lambs going into the midst of wolves. Last week's extract from the previous verses of St Luke's Gospel reminded us that he had already set his face to Jerusalem, that his mind was already on the end of the road and what lay in store for him there. This week now a sense of his expectation that his followers will take a similarly arduous and challenging road, sometimes accepted, sometimes rejected, as they labour to bring in the Lord's harvest. *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.*

Though you're tired and weary, still journey on; keep right on to the end of the road. A hundred years ago this year, Harry Lauder tragically lost his only son but did not give up. Instead he found strength and encouragement to keep going through faith in God who willingly gave His only son for the life of the world. As at this time we continue to give thanks not just for those who laid down their lives in the Battle of the Somme but for all who survived and endured, may we seek and find for our own lives and our own times similar strength and encouragement to keep on building the Kingdom of God, where the ways are ways of gentleness, and all the paths are paths of peace. *So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up.* 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.