

**SERMON PREACHED IN ST GILES' CATHEDRAL ON THE TUESDAY OF HOLY WEEK, 2017 BY  
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As the drama unfolded outside the Palace of Westminster on 22 March, with pedestrians mowed down by a 4x4 and a policeman fighting for his life, the leader of the Commons rose to make a statement to the House. His Labour opposite number responded, adding that the thoughts and prayers of MPs were with those caught up in the atrocity. The leader and members of the house readily concurred. Who could demur?

Well it wasn't long before a popular radio host tweeted: 'Can we stop all this pray for London nonsense. It's these b.....stupid beliefs that help create this violence in the first place'. We might bridle at such a sentiment but there are many who will not.

At the heart of Holy Week lies an act of violence carried out in the name of a heady mix of religion and politics. Jesus was crucified on a charge of blasphemy but it was the Roman governor who had the final say. In the run up to that final horror the record lists various acts of violence – the disciple cutting of the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus being whipped, beaten and made to carry his cross. Reading the Hebrew Scriptures through Christian eyes we readily see the prophetic force of passages which speak of God's suffering servant giving his back to the smiters, being despised, rejected and laughed to scorn by all who saw him. Holy Week is a violent week and we cannot excise that seam of violence from the record.

Today there is an understandable political focus on the violence associated with particular manifestations of Islam. However, honesty bids us also acknowledge violence which has been carried out in the name of Christianity. Take the concepts of jihad and crusade. Essentially 'jihad' means 'struggle' in the sense of the inner struggle against sin; but, as we know, it has also come to be interpreted as a violent struggle against perceived enemies of Islam and, as with our own Christian history, those 'enemies' may include fellow believers who follow different traditions and practices.

Likewise the word 'crusade', deriving from the Latin word for 'cross' can be used in a benevolent evangelical sense, as in Billy Graham's famous Tell Scotland Crusade of the 1950s when over a million people attended rallies in Glasgow's Kelvin Hall. But there is also a darker history of mediaeval wars to reclaim Jerusalem from Islam, on the assumption that the slaughter of perceived enemies of the Cross was the way to usher in the kingdom of God. And today there is no doubt that the word 'crusade', as with the term 'jihad', has become tarnished through an association with the forceful and sometimes violent assertion of one culture and creed over another.

The novel I have chosen for this Holy Week service is John Buchan's *Witch Wood*. Published in 1927, Buchan considered it the best of his novels, set in the 1640s – a time of great religious turbulence and violence in Scotland. The principal character is a young minister, the Reverend David Sempill, who is inducted to the parish of Woodilee in Upper Tweeddale

on 26<sup>th</sup> August 1644. There is an early reference to St Giles' in the story when Sempill's ministerial neighbours call to welcome him. A handsome repast of chicken and grouse is produced at short notice by Sempill's housekeeper, the respectable widow woman Isobel Veitch. Over the meal the senior ministerial neighbour, the Rev Mungo Muirhead, extols the qualities of one of the Woodilee elders, Gabriel Caird by name, a member of the Assembly who had had a hand (and I quote) 'in the previous work of grace done in the East Kirk of St Giles' two years syne.' At the time this spacious cathedral was compartmentalised into four churches. The East Kirk occupied the area in which we are now gathered and the work of grace was the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant – of which more in a moment.

Buchan's account of this ministerial gathering also includes an incident which offers an insight into the serious nature of these men. As a Mr Fordyce savours Mrs Veitch's moor-fowl a tooth loosens and comes out in his hand. Carefully he wraps the tooth in his handkerchief, explaining to his colleagues: 'I have kept ilka tooth I have ever cast and they will go into my coffin with me that my bodily parts may be together at the Resurrection.' At a polite Edinburgh dinner party today this would probably be something of a conversation stopper; but not in a 17<sup>th</sup> century Upper Tweeddale manse. 'Would you shorten the arm of the Lord?', asked a Mr Proudfoot, testily. 'Can he no' gather your remnants from the uttermost parts of the earth?' 'True, true', Mr Fordyce replies, 'but it's just my fancy to keep all my dust in one place.'

Moving on: the effect of the Scottish Reformation was to change the Church from Catholic to Protestant; but what kind of Protestant? Eventually two parties emerged – those following James VI who favoured episcopalian government of the Kirk and those following Andrew Melville who favoured presbyterianism. Not until 1690, 130 years after the Reformation, was the Kirk finally established as presbyterian.

In 1638, six years before David Sempill's arrival in Woodilee, a national covenant was signed along the road in Greyfriars Kirkyard. Two prominent nobles amongst the first to sign were the Earls of Argyll and Montrose, with copies then sent around the country for general signing. The Covenant claimed freedom for the church to follow its preferred Presbyterian polity, in face of the Charles 1<sup>st</sup>'s determination to impose a unified Episcopal structure north and south of the border. The king was not for yielding and soon theological debate evolved into armed conflict in what became known as the Bishops' Wars. However, it was not long before splits emerged within the supporters of the Covenant. Some, prominent amongst whom was Earl of Argyll, aligned themselves with English parliamentarians against the king, pressing for a united Presbyterian church north and south of the border. It was this aspiration which found expression in the Solemn League and Covenant referred to earlier, signed in London and here in St Giles'. However Montrose, while supportive of the Scots' right to choose their own Church, would have no truck with taking up arms against the king and facilitating what he feared would become a dour Presbyterian theocracy. Indeed, Montrose went on to become the king's captain general and scourge of the extreme

covenanters. Thus he and Argyll, who had together signed the National Covenant, now found themselves on opposing sides.

For them, as for the king, things did not end well. Charles was executed at Whitehall in 1649; the following year Montrose was hanged, drawn and quartered in Edinburgh; a decade later it was Argyll's turn for a premature meeting with his maker. Following the restoration of the monarchy Argyll was executed on the orders of Charles II. Just a few days later, so he knew it was to happen, Montrose was given a belated state funeral here in St Giles'. Nineteenth century memorials to both men are here in this cathedral – Montrose's on the south aisle to the left of the organ; Argyll's on the north aisle near the statue of John Knox.

It was against this troubled background that young David Sempill began his ministry to the people of Woodilee. Quite early in the novel Buchan has David exploring his parish when, riding through some woodland, he encounters a small group of soldiers, attended by their groom. They are lost but David guides them to the place they are seeking. As they ride he is rather surprised to hear the groom murmuring some lines of Latin verse. He can't resist responding with the next couplet, to which the groom responds: 'I did not look to find a scholar in these hills'. 'Nor did I know', replied Sempill, 'that Virgil was the common reading of soldiers.' In fact, as is eventually revealed, the groom is none other than Montrose, in hiding and disguised for his own safety. The young minister immediately finds himself conflicted. His ministerial neighbours are strong for the Covenant and he feels he ought to defend their principles; at the same time he cannot dispute Montrose's view that, as Buchan puts it, the Kirk's sovereign must be King Jesus, not King Covenant. As the conversation develops Montrose distinguishes between the earlier National Covenant, which sought to establish religious freedom, and the later Solemn League and Covenant. This latter he regarded as the Kirk stepping beyond the bounds prescribed by the law of God and the law of man. 'Is it not more pleasing to God', he asks 'that his ministers should comfort the sick, the widow and the fatherless and guide souls to heaven, than that they should scrabble for civil pre-eminence?' A year after publishing *Witch Wood* Buchan published his definitive biography of his hero, Montrose. The two works stand very much together.

One of the consequences of the stern, covenanting theology of the period was to instil an attitude of guilt in the seeking and taking of pleasure. As a result the natural human quest for enjoyment was driven out of sight and underground. The 'witch wood' of the title thus becomes the setting for lively celebrations such as Beltane and Hallowe'en which the Kirk viewed as pagan and immoral, all carried out behind the minister's back. David's ministerial anger is fierce when he finds out what is going on, though we also see the human side when David takes a walk in the woods at the beginning of spring. After the harsh winter he revels in the spring air and coming upon a bank of primroses he gathers some for the manse table, also setting a bouquet in his coat and another in his bonnet. Buchan observes: 'These latter would have to go before he reached the highway or the parish would think its minister had

gone daft. But here in the secret greenwood he could forget decorum and bedeck himself like a child.'

Away from the greenwood David Sempill soon has two fights on his hand. It is evident that what the Kirk regarded as pagan rituals were being conducted in the Witch Wood and he strongly suspects the leader of these gatherings to be none other than his chief elder, Gabriel Caird. Evidence is gathered and David refers the matter to the presbytery whose incredulous moderator is none other the Rev Mungo Muirhead, one of first to call on the new minister. But then David finds himself in even bigger trouble. Montrose's outstanding run of victories on behalf of the king came to an end at Philiphaugh, near Selkirk in September 1645, a year after David's induction. One night he is awakened by a persistent knocking at the manse door. It is Montrose himself, on the run, again disguised as a groom, asking if he can leave his right hand man whose broken leg is hindering their escape. David does what he believes to be the Christian thing and offers the sanctuary of the manse. In time the story comes out and David's complaint about the pagan ongoings of his elder are matched with a presbytery process against him for sheltering an enemy of the Kirk who, by definition must be an enemy of God. Indicting David with a string of fierce Old Testament texts spelling out the destruction that waits God's enemies, Muirhead declares: 'You would set up your own fallible judgement against God's plain command and the resolved opinion of the hail Kirk'.

David replies: 'I am a minister of Christ first and of the Kirk second. If the Kirk forgets its master's teaching we part Company.'

'And what is that teaching, prithee?' demands Muirhead.

'To have mercy and not sacrifice,' replies David.

To this Muirhead's response is to close his eyes as if in pain.

Lest any not familiar with 'Witch Wood' now be minded to read it I will leave it there and not reveal how things turn out for the young minister in the novel.

Going back to where we began, with last month's London atrocity; and yesterday we had the funeral service of PC Keith Palmer. We have also seen a terrorist attack in Stockholm and the Palm Sunday massacre of Coptic Christians in Egypt by so-called Islamic State. A leading article in the *Guardian* newspaper following the London attack bore the title, 'Holy books encourage both war and peace. Their readers choose.' How true but which passages do we choose? To quote from that leading article: 'The black slaves of the US and the Caribbean read their masters' Bibles and found in them a message of hope and liberation, while the slave owners relied on the same book to justify their own behaviour. Holy books are always read within an existing frame of associations and loyalties.'

Holy week is a violent week but in the midst of it are pointers to a better way. For example, we have those words we read earlier from Matthew, after the disciple severed the ear of the high priest's slave: 'Put your sword back in its place; for all who take the sword shall perish by the sword.' And in the first chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians we read Paul's reflections on the Cross, which the world might see as the tough response of strong men to an existential threat, but which in truth reveals not strength but weakness, not courage but fear, not wisdom but folly – for, in the final analysis, God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

I conclude this sermon for the Tuesday of Holy Week with some anonymous lines which may be familiar but are certainly worth repeating and remembering:

Jesus had no servants, yet they called him Master, had no degree yet they called him Teacher, had no medicines, yet they called him Healer, He had no army yet kings feared him, he won no military battles, yet he conquered the world. He committed no crime, yet they crucified him. He was buried in a tomb, yet he lives today. Amen.