

OPENING SERVICE OF EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

ST GILES CATHEDRAL EDINBURGH

SUNDAY 16TH AUGUST 2009

HOMILY PREACHED BY CARDINAL KEITH PATRICK O'BRIEN

INTRODUCTION:

It is indeed a privilege being here with you all – a great cross section of citizens of our country led by the First Citizen of Edinburgh, the Lord Provost George Grubb and his wife, Elizabeth, as well as very many other representatives of our City and country; and an equally great cross section of visitors to our City from all over the world.

Our Service this morning in St Giles Cathedral, the High Kirk of Edinburgh is one of prayer and praise, it is one of thanksgiving and one of intercession, it is one in which we can all unite our hearts and voices so that a common prayer of praise ascends to our Father in Heaven.

EDINBURGH INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL:

Just one month ago there was a great “Homecoming” to Scotland. The “Gathering of the Clans” was a centrepiece of Scotland’s “Year of Homecoming” celebrations marking the 250th anniversary of the birth of Rabbin Burns, Scotland’s National Bard.

Having celebrated just one month ago, our Capital City is again in celebratory mode at the beginning of our International Festival along with the many other Festival celebrations, now some 10 or so, taking place at this present time.

Over the next few weeks many thousands of us will share in uplifting concerts, enthralling drama, much appreciated art, the great variety of the Festival Fringe, and what one can simply describe as the “companionship of the crowd” all over our City with the crowd concentrated on various areas in particular – our major sites of the Castle, the Palace and the Parliament, with Princes Street itself, especially the Gardens at this present time, and of course the historic Royal Mile.

All of this has given us a greater appreciation of the beauty of art, of the ways in which people can reach out to a deeper understanding of what beauty is, and perhaps even more important a greater feeling of fellowship with one another keeping in mind again something of the thoughts and words of Rabbin Burns who wrote in so many moving ways of the equality of man.

VALUE OF THE FESTIVAL – SILENCE:

Obviously at this time all of us derive value from being together - and hopefully value from the performances which we attend. However I myself often think that the most valued time for me and perhaps others during our Festival weeks is that time when I can achieve **some sort of silence** – whether during a time of worship such as we are enjoying at present, whether during the silence when the lone piper plays on the Battlements of Edinburgh Castle in the midst of the then silent massed pipes and drums on the Esplanade, whether in the midst of a beautiful piece of music or

when a pause occurs in a dramatic presentation. These moments of silence are most important and perhaps give us time for some real thought as to what is going on in our City and in our country at present.

VALUE OF THE FESTIVAL – PRAYER:

How things have changed over those past sixty years or so of the life of the Festival. We must wonder in a realistic sense, but not in any pessimistic sense whether or not they have changed for the better.

We realise now something more of the economic misery in which we are at this present time. The headlines of one of our national papers the day after the great Gathering of the Clans was not about the tens of thousands in Holy Rood or in the Royal Mile but rather the headline on the front page was: “Twenty Thousand Marchers Tell Diageo: Don’t Axe Jobs”. This was an indication of the economic crisis in which we now are.

Further we read in our press at this present time and see on the media other aspects of the situation in which we are at present in our own country and in the world.

One visitor to Scotland some years ago, in 1982 was the late much loved Pope John Paul II. He said at that time: “We find it harder to follow Christ today than appears to have been the case before. Witnessing to him in modern life means a daily contest. As believers, we are constantly exposed to pressures by modern society which would compel us to conform to the standards of this secular age, substitute new priorities, restrict our aspirations at risk of compromising our Christian conscience”. Those words uttered some twenty seven years ago as I have indicated are perhaps evermore true today when we consider the world around us.

On speaking as the only person from Scotland who participated in the Conclave which elected the successor of John Paul II, namely Pope Benedict XVI I, I vividly remember his own words when he inaugurated his Papacy. He then stated: “We are living in alienation, in the salt waters of suffering and death, in a sea of darkness without light”.

On looking around our world – our world of poverty and suffering, our world of war and want – who can deny the truth of those words in the midst of our own rejoicing.

Consequently, as well as the response of ‘the silence’ in the face of Almighty God, so also I see the **value of vocal prayer** and perhaps especially the **prayer of the Psalter**, that collection of 150 psalms from the Old Testament. There has been a wonderful tradition of the prayer of the Psalter, beginning with our Jewish elder brothers and sisters in the faith.

Indeed we might consider the Psalter as being a sort of **theme feature of our Festival Service this year**. The two readings recently proclaimed the morning, one read by the Lord Provost and the other by the Festival Director, both mention psalms. A litany for the arts, written by the Minister himself some years ago, has each petition followed by a verse from a psalm. The choir will sing two of the psalm-based pieces from Mozart’s Vespers and one of the congregational hymns is part of one of the metrical psalms. In addition, the Lewis Psalm-Singers, a group giving a recital in the official Festival Programme, have and are singing Gaelic psalms in the traditional way in our Cathedral this morning, initially the first two verses from Psalm 100 and then the first two verses from Psalm 92.

In particular, if I may be personal and speaking as a Roman Catholic priest for some 44 years now, the psalms form the basis of my own prayer each day, with my morning and evening prayer being based on three psalms each, while my prayer during the day also has three psalms, with my liturgy of readings also beginning with another three different psalms from the Old Testament.

The spiritual rituals of the Psalter need no commendation. As well as being the prayers of the people of God of the Old Testament, so they have been adopted by the Christian Church unchanged for her official prayer. The ancient entreaties of the Old Testament have become more ardent for Christians since the coming of Jesus Christ with the events of Holy Week having taught mankind of the infinite quality of the love of God, the universality and gravity of sin, and the glory promised to the faithful. For the Christian the hopes sung by the psalmists have been fulfilled, the Messiah has come, he reigns and all nations are summoned to praise him.

CONCLUSION:

Yes indeed this is at time of rejoicing in Edinburgh – a time of rejoicing that is rightly due to us all. But we must never forget the reverse side of our rejoicing and our responsibility, most of us, as Christians in our world at this present time.

Perhaps one of the results of us being here at a time of relaxation and rejoicing is that we might recharge our batteries for the ongoing battle which faces us in our country and in our world. As Christians we are called upon to bear witness to Jesus Christ by the witness of our own lives, by our reaching out to those in need in our own country and those far away, by our striving for peace – peace in our homes, in our country and in our world.

I mention those words of Pope Benedict XVI. May I conclude by completing his thought on that occasion when he said: “The net of the Gospel pulls us out of the waters of death and brings us into the splendour of God’s light, into true life”. That is also the prayer of the psalms – to bring us into the splendour of God’s light, into true life.

It is then that we can enjoy our real relaxation and pleasure in living our Christian lives in union with God and an ever increasing union with one another.