**Scottish Guild of Servers- Annual Festival, Falkirk**

**3rd September 2022**

**St Gregory the Great**

*Ecclus 47.8-11; 1 Thess 2.3-8, Mark 10.42-45*

A good but very poor Rabbi knew that life would be more comfortable if he had money. So, he used to pray regularly, ‘Lord, let me win the lottery.’ But his prayer was never answered. One day, when he was praying again, ‘Lord, let me win the lottery,’ God spoke to him. ‘Look Manny,’ said God, ‘meet me halfway on this: *buy a ticket*.’

Iain McGilchrist, who writes about how our brains work, uses this story to illustrate the part that spirituality and faith play in human complexity – that faith isn’t something that involves a turning away from rationality. ‘There is nothing blind about faith,’ he says, ‘but there is nothing certain about it, either. It is like trusting the outstretched hand that helps you ford the stream: you see the stream, you see the hand; you do not blindly step but step you must.’ We meet God halfway.

I would suggest that worship is one crucial example of how we meet God halfway, how we reach out our hand and take the step of faith. We sing our praises, we appoint musicians, we celebrate the holy name of God (as our first reading puts it), yet we do so standing on the brink of mystery, peering into that which is beyond words to describe, beyond our limited minds to comprehend. And our praises, our music and dance draw others in so that they too reach out their hand to take that step from knowing into unknowing.

Worship takes actions and objects that are ordinary and mundane and, for brief moments consecrates them, transfigures them, offering us a glimpse of holiness. When offered sincerely, when received with open hearts, worship invites us beyond the merely cerebral, beyond words, to open ourselves to the possibility that all this, all that we are told of God, all that we say of God is profoundly true.

And if this is what worship is it places quite a responsibility on us, we who are charged with leading worship. For it’s our voices and, especially for servers, our actions, how we move and dance, as it were, in full view of others, that offers the outstretched hand. Like St Paul (in our second reading) we offer our own selves so that others may be gently nursed into faith. And that means, for many of us, extra hours rehearsing our role, early arrival at church, late departure. For we want to offer our very best.

This is something St Gregory the Great will have understood very well – a sixth century pope who is credited with being ‘The Father of Christian worship’ and whose feast we keep today. He leaves an extraordinary body of work on liturgy and Scripture. And whilst for him all things ultimately point to God, and the orderliness of worship can offer us a glimpse of heaven, yet fundamental to all his teaching was that our lives beyond worship must be lived in step with the values we profess when before the altar.

Admittedly, Gregory speaks most sternly to the shepherds of the sheep, to prelates and preachers – as he says, ‘the one who is required by the necessity of their position to speak the highest things is compelled by the same necessity to do the highest things.’ In a world always eager to call out our hypocrisy, we know this applies to us all. And at a festival of servers, it’s important to remember that whether we are up front or not, worship is where all God’s people, us included, seek holiness in sacrament and song, where we share our longing to be united in Christ… and where we are sent out to love and serve our Lord. It is first and foremost a spiritual exercise whereby God’s people journey into God so that they may journey outwards into God’s world.

Gregory is only saying what Jesus said before him. It’s there in our gospel reading – ‘whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant… whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. I didn’t come to be served,’ he says, ‘but to serve and to give my life…’ In other words, the quest for holiness is never about ego, about status, about taking the starring role.

I remember as a young curate that, as the most junior clergyperson, when clergy gathered for a diocesan service it was my lot to walk at the front of the procession. Behind me all the other clergy shuffled around as they arranged themselves in order of seniority, with the canons at the back and behind them the archdeacons, then the Dean and, last of all, the bishop. The irony was that we’d become so determined to exemplify Jesus’ axiom that the last shall be first and the first last that we had entirely inverted it. The bishop’s position in the line, rather than being a sign of humility indicated that he was considered more important.

I suspect that this is an occupational hazard for anyone who dresses up in special clothes in church, including servers. To assume a certain status, a self-importance, a possessiveness of our roles. Not that I can point to any examples of this. As a bishop I turn up at a different church each week, blissfully unaware of the group dynamics in any congregation or cohort of servers and, I have to say, that my experience of Edinburgh servers (and I’m sure it's true across the Province) is that they manage brilliantly the necessary trick of being visible and invisible at the same time. And when, on occasions, there are large numbers of servers at work, they choreograph the dance of liturgy with grace, reverence and obvious enjoyment. For it’s their task, it’s your task, to point towards the sacrament, the holy presence of God, whilst also being sacraments, signs, of the spiritual grace of servanthood. For a brief hour you, we, are given the extraordinary privilege of acting out in the drama of the mass what that greater service might look like in which we give of our very selves, as Jesus gave, who came not to be served but to serve.

At the recent Lambeth Conference, Stephen Cotterill, the Archbishop of York, spoke powerfully about evangelism. Just as Starbucks exists to make coffee, he said, so the church exists to make disciples. He popped up again a few days later to explain that actually what the church exists for is to worship God – but he would argue that this must inevitably involve making disciples. A few years ago at the Edinburgh Book Festival, Rowan Williams, when asked what the church is for, answered, ‘The church exists to worship God and to grow in holiness.’ And we could argue, I’m sure, that a church growing in holiness is one in which disciples are being made, in which we are being made and remade.

Note, however, that for both speakers it is the worship of God that comes first. Which underlines how essential is our role in ensuring that God is worshipped, given worth, by the very best that we can offer; how essential is our role in enabling the church to be what it’s meant to be. For in worship we go to meet God halfway, in worship we enable others to make that same journey, to reach out their hands and dare to take the step into faith. In worship, God’s longing and our longing touch and spark and thrill and strengthen and call and send.

Yes, as those who come not to be served but to serve, you do this, you offer this service both to God and God’s church, and I thank you for it.

Amen.