

General Assembly 2023 - Sunday Morning Worship Homily

The Revd Sally Foster-Fulton, who has led Christian Aid in Scotland since 2016, and is on a year's sabbatical while serving as the Moderator of the Church of Scotland, gave the homily to the General Assembly during Sunday Morning Worship.

Genesis 2: 8-10

And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there, God put the human whom had been formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Psalms 52: 8

But I am like a green olive tree
in the house of God.
I trust in the steadfast love of God
forever and ever.

John 15:5

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Matthew 13: 31-32

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches."

From *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* by Louis de Bernieres

Love is a temporary madness, it erupts like volcanoes and then subsides. And when it subsides you have to make a decision. You have to work out whether your root was so entwined together that it is inconceivable that you should ever part. Because this is what love is. Love is not breathlessness, it is not excitement, it is not the promulgation of promises of eternal passion. That is just being in love, which any fool can do. Love itself is what is left over when being in love has burned away, and this is both an art and a fortunate accident. Those that truly love have roots that grow towards each other underground, and when all the pretty blossoms have fallen from their branches, they find that they are one tree and not two.

Homily

Sacred space surrounds us – if we are still, and sense it. Grace imbues creation and every created thing, calm, it is here, reaching deep like roots, grounding us and giving flight to our dreams. I invite you, as you're able, to stand up and plant yourself in the spot you've found. Or plant your feet solidly as you sit.

Take this moment and be completely still. Close your eyes and feel the ground, solid beneath your feet. Feel the connection – firm beneath this floor; deep earth, rich and

fertile, where we all come from and will return – life and earth and air and each other – what a gift.

Now lift your head, look upward – and sense – the air around you, the breath of others – stuff of life so essential; yet often like breathing, taken for granted. If you dare, join hands with someone near you – feel the strength, the fragility, the connection – human to human – being. There are almost 8 billion of us, a global neighbourhood – this sacred space shared with each other and God's created order. My Grandmother had a saying - 'Bloom where you are planted, and share the soil of God's good earth.'

With feet firmly on the ground, with hands outstretched to embrace each other, with minds and spirits stretching skyward, we are an integral part of this world. You are sacred space.

As we sit, know that sacred space still surrounds you, grace and love embrace you, and life calls us into an unbreakable connection.

There is a South African phrase, Ubuntu, difficult to translate into English, but the closest we come is 'I am because you are.' I've chosen that as my wider theme for this year, so the request to focus on the grace of connection made my heart sing! Thank you for your inspired theme! And, for me, the imagery we heard in our readings exudes the profundity of connection.

Tree imagery, connectedness to each other and to the earth, shared sacred space. Root, trunk, branch and leaf – life exploding from earth. It's everywhere in ancient literature and lore/ it's planted throughout our sacred text ... what we heard are just a few examples from the Bible.

Maybe it's because a tree is the embodiment of our lives – roots go deep, plant you firmly, ground you, nourish you - and yet you stretch ... every growing thing does – leaves and flowers lean towards the sun, faces turn skyward ... and a tree is a community in itself – a system of root and stem, branches and leaves and fruit – all intricately and intimately related. Like us, even though all too often, our actions deny it.

Almost 8 billion people – plants, other creatures – sustainable earth vying for shared space. And everything inter-dependent. Behind every statistic we hear is someone's story/behind every number is a name and a purpose and a dream.

Powerful discernment – illegal migration bill and the war in Ukraine/the climate catastrophe and how you as a community of faith will respond ... all leaning into this grace-filled space of inter-connection.

Be in no doubt that it matters.

- Who planted you?
- Who/what nourishes you?
- What connects you?

- What does the URC, this beautiful limb of the body of Christ need to plant, to nurture, to grow?

Salty drop in a deep blue ocean

Grain of sand on an endless white beach

Leaf on a tree in a vast majestic forest, petal in a sea of poppies, blade of grass in a field green and growing ...

Part of something bigger – thanks be to God.

Note in a song, voice in a choir, instrument in a symphony of sound.

Word on a page, chapter in a story, character in an evolving saga ...

Face in a crowd, one in a million, or a billion – or 7 or 8 ...

Part of something bigger – thanks be to God.

When we don't see the beauty in the bigger picture, when we won't work well as a cog in-a-wheel, when we can't come round to the reality that the universe doesn't revolve around us, forgive.

Being human depends on others to be human with – help us embrace our interdependency.

Part of something bigger – how beautiful! Thanks be to you, God.

Closing Challenge

Go from this place and plant yourself in the spot you've found. Take a moment and be completely still. Close your eyes and feel the ground, solid beneath your feet.

Feel the connection – deep earth, rich and fertile, where we all come from and will return – but life and earth and each other – what a gift. Then look upward – and sense – the air around you, the breath of others – stuff of life so essential, yet taken for granted.

Then, if you dare, sometime that day, join hands with someone near you – feel, the strength, the fragility, the connection – human to human – being. There are over 7 billion of us sharing this planet – with each other and God's created order. My Grandmother always said 'Bloom where you are planted, but share the soil of God's good earth.'

And before we leave: With feet firmly on the ground, with hands outstretched to embrace each other, with minds and spirits stretching skyward, we embrace your day – the eyes of our hearts open to your vision.