

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2021

I love both Glasgow and Edinburgh in equal measure!

Within Scotland, though, since at least the early eighteenth century, a sense of sparring and sometimes outright competition between the country's two largest cities has been a defining aspect of the nation.

It continues to be so, and it is all done in good humour.

Glasgow laughs at Edinburgh and Edinburgh laughs at Glasgow, and it is all harmless.

They are indeed only forty miles apart, but, in spirit, each considers itself far removed from its counterpart.

And we all know the jokes that have told by the citizens of each down through the years. In Glasgow, the visitor will be asked to take off his jacket, make himself comfortable and the kettle will go on. In Edinburgh, your hostess will ask, "You will have had your tea?"

A visitor to our capital was walking along Princes Street, when a fierce dog appeared and attacked a small boy. Disregarding his own safety, the man grabbed the dog and throttled it.

A reporter from the Edinburgh Evening News arrived on the scene and shook the hero firmly by the hand. Then he informed him that the headline would read, "Brave local hero saves child by killing vicious beast!"

"But I am not from Edinburgh," protested the visitor.

"Okay, in that case, we will run a headline that says, "Kind stranger to Edinburgh saves child by killing dog.""

"But I'm not really a stranger to Edinburgh. I'm from Glasgow."

That night, the headline read, "Glaswegian slays family pet!"

I became closely acquainted with Edinburgh away back in 1977 just after graduating from Glasgow University, having spent seven very happy years on Gilmorehill, at “the pirn stuck wi’ preens”, as Sir Gilbert Scott’s superb edifice was once described by Sir Tom Honeyman.

As a young probationer I was sent to spend my probationary period at Fairmilehead Parish Church on the southside of Edinburgh. I was this large and growing congregation’s first Assistant Minister, so there was great excitement on both sides. Up until then I only knew Fairmilehead by seeing it on the destination board of the number 11 and number 15 buses going along Princes Street! The leafy suburb, high above the city, was growing apace with lots of new houses and many young families joining the congregation.

Having secured part of a large house on Hermitage Drive in Morningside, this would be my home and my base for the next twelve months until I received a call to my first parish. Morningside in itself is another quite another experience, an enclave of an Edwardian world in the midst of the capital!

The lady of the house, Miss Dorothy Hunter, was in her early 80s, and this had been the family home since her father purchased it in 1904 – with its tower, its huge garden, its tennis court and its revolving summer house! My bedroom, complete with dressing room and bathroom ensuite, overlooked the southside of the Castle; my sitting room had been the library of the house; and my kitchen the butler’s pantry. Miss Hunter spoke of earlier days when the family had a cook, two maids, and a gardener. To this innocent young man from Johnstone, this was a new world altogether – my first introduction to the Downton experience and to the Edinburgh Society for the Relief of Indigent Gentlewomen, in which Miss Hunter played a very active role!

As the months sped by, I loved every moment – the Sunday School had over 300 children; I was asked to start a Youth Fellowship; there were two morning services to accommodate the congregation

comfortably; my “Bishop” (the term of affection given by a Probationer to his or her boss) was a task master, but a brilliant teacher! I had to meet him at his Manse on Frogston Road West, opposite the Princess Margaret Rose Orthopaedic Hospital, every Tuesday morning. After his wife had served coffee, he would painstakingly go through the list of visits he had given me to complete the previous week. Usually, this was a list of forty names, and, without fail, I would only have managed to call on 30 at the most. “Fraser,” he would say, “you are spending too long in people’s houses. After twenty minutes, unless there is a pressing problem, it is time to leave!” Well, Fraser never ever learnt that lesson, as he would be quite happy to sit back and be served tea and cake and have a good blether!

The list of fascinating people whom I got to know and love in that congregation was very long – there was Mrs Shinie, whose daughter Muriel was the Matron of Edinburgh’s Royal Infirmary. Mrs Shinie would be seated with Muriel in their pew at the second service on Sunday mornings. She was as deaf as a door post despite her two hearing aids, and I doubt she heard much of the preacher’s sermon, yet she sang her heart out with every hymn. When I was visiting her one afternoon, I asked her why she came to Church so faithfully when she could hear so little. “Fraser,” she replied, “I want people to know whose side I am on!” What a witness!

There was Miss Eleanor Smith who was the Personnel Officer at one of the big woollen mills in the Borders. Eleanor was a sheer delight, and up until her passing a few years ago, she sent me the Church Magazine faithfully every month. When I left Fairmilehead to go to my first parish in the village of Neilston, she and her mother presented me with a bale of beautiful clerical grey cloth from the mill to be fashioned into a bespoke suit. I wore it with pride for many years. Such generosity and thoughtfulness!

There was Mrs Amy Black who lived on Biggar Road, not far from the Church. Amy’s late husband had been the Organist and Choirmaster several years before and she was a real hoot! Something

I never ever told her, until years later, was the day she had invited me to come for my tea at 6.00p.m.. So my last visit of the afternoon was to her next door neighbours, Mr and Mrs John Reid. Mr Reid didn't keep good health. He had had a fascinating life as he had been one of the instigators of the Edinburgh International Festival. I arrived about 5, and Mrs Reid said, "Now, we are just going to sit at the fire, and have some bacon and eggs for tea, Fraser, so you can stay and join us. I was really thrown at this point and didn't want to offend them. So I sat on and on that winter's evening, next to a huge blazing fire, I was entertained right royally – for not only was there bacon and eggs, there were homemade scones; drop scones (the boy from Johnstone called them "pancakes"!); fruit loaf; apple pie!

Yes, and at 6, I went next door, and there another feast awaited the Assistant Minister. The Vicar of Dibley had nothing on me!

And each Sunday as I took part in the worship, I looked down on several members of the Church of Scotland Staff from 121, George Street, including the General Treasurer and his wife, the Assistant Treasurer and his wife!

My memories of that year are legion – many of those lovely folk are long gone, but their impact on me has never left me.

We never know just how much our lives touch others.

So often the Gospel isn't spoken, but simply put into random acts of kindness that are never forgotten by folks from the East and from the West!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister