

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 8th August 2021

I confess! I am, what is called “an anorak”! In other words, I love trains and buses and trams, and everything connected with them. Amongst my prize possessions, I have the linen destination blind of a Glasgow Corporation tramcar, with all the place names, and the little handle which the driver would use to turn it on the destination board above his cab – there they are, in splendid array – “Whitevale; Scotstoun West; Carnwadric; Springburn; The Normal School....”. About 60 routes in all!

And, as for steam trains, well, I go weak at the knees.

I noticed that Glasgow Central Station celebrated its 142nd birthday last Sunday – it was opened by the Caledonian Railway on 1st August 1879, and all down these years has been an iconic feature of the life of Glaswegians. Fashioned in blonde sandstone, with its iron girders and dark wood, and its 48,000 panes of glass (the largest glass roof in the world), it has been called “a cathedral to the iron horse”, and it is certainly worthy of that moniker.

Just before the Pandemic stopped us all in our tracks, I had booked to go on a ninety-minute historical tour of the two square miles that make up the station, and was looking forward to hearing the many compelling tales connected with it. I am now hoping that I will be able to do this soon, and be guided through the abandoned subterranean platforms and tunnels, sealed up since Dr Beeching took his axe to our railway system in the 1960s.

When I was a student at Glasgow University in the early 1970s, I arrived at Central every morning at 8.25, before either walking up to Gilmorehill if the notion took me, or taking the 59 bus from Hope

Street to University Avenue. Then, in the evening, I would return to stand on the concourse to keep my eye on the train departure information, which, in those far off days, was displayed on 13 large windows, overlooking the throngs of travellers – one for each platform. Into those apertures, teams of highly skilled personnel manhandled large destination boards which successively displayed full details of all the rapidly changing train departures; the absence of any such obvious human control behind the current giant yellow-dotted display board does little for the confidence of present day travellers!

Today, the concourse has been completely modernised and boasts shops and eateries galore, as well as retaining its famous clock suspended from the roof; then there is the 15” Shell from the First World War, a landmark which has served as a rendezvous for generations of couples, the scene of thousands of tearful farewells and joyous reunions. There was an outcry from Glaswegians when, a few years ago, the Shell was moved from its prominent place and sited near the toilets, then later, at the Gordon Street entrance, and so great was the feeling that the rail authorities moved it back again! And, of course, the grand Victorian gates – now restored to their gold and green pomp after years in glossy mourning for the death of Prince Albert, the gates which are shut every night at half past midnight and reopened at 4.00a.m.

It is awesome to think that Central Station is a starting point or destination for some 40 million people every year, and there are approximately 1,300 train movements every day. The tannoy is ceaseless in its poetic incantations – Priesthill, Nitshill, Barrhill, Carluke, Carstairs, Cardonald, Kilmaurs, Kilwinning, Kilmarnock.

And, of course, for several years now, since the move from St Enoch Station, the Ayrshire service arrives and departs from Central.

If the stout walls of this station could talk, they would list the names of Royalty and the rich and the famous who have all graced its environs – Queen Victoria; King George V and Queen Mary; Laurel

and Hardy; Gracie Fields; Clement Attlee; the Andrews sisters; Roy Rogers and Trigger; Gene Kelly; President John F Kennedy.... the list goes on and on. And we would hear too of the hundreds of men who left from Platform One to fight in the Spanish Civil War, fists held high, singing the Internationale; and the wives and mothers and sisters and sweethearts who came in 1919, to meet returning soldiers, and those distraught ones who found their husbands, brothers and sons coming home to be laid to rest.

The memories are legion.

But Central Station is very much a living place today. Young and old, rich and poor, famous and infamous, pass through it in their thousands every day on their way to work, to home, to meet friends and lovers; to go on holiday; to visit relatives; and sometimes, now and again, just to spot trains!

Central Station is a microcosm of life – it is all about life – folk hurrying, thronging, arriving, departing, experiencing joy and sadness, loneliness and camaraderie.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons that I am so fascinated by it – you don't need to look far for a story.

A friend recently sent me words by an unknown author, entitled, “The Train of Life”, and I was very touched by them and wanted to share them with you:

“At birth, we board the train and meet our parents, and we believe that they will always travel by our side.

As time goes by, other people board and leave the train, and they will be significant – our siblings, friends, children and even the love of your life.

However, at some station, our parents will step down from the train, leaving us on this journey alone.

Others will step down over time and leave a permanent vacuum.

Some will go so unnoticed that we do not realise that they have vacated their seats.

This train journey will be full of joy, sorrow, fantasy, expectations, hellos, goodbyes and farewells.

Success consists on having a good relationship with all passengers, requiring that we give the best of ourselves.

The mystery to everyone is: we do not know at which station we ourselves will step down from the train.

So, we must live in the best way – love, forgive and give of the best of who we really are.

It is important to do this because when the time comes for us to get off, and leave our seat empty, we should leave behind beautiful memories for those who are continuing to journey on the train of life.

I wish you all a joyful journey.”

These past months have been a frightening and tender journey for a lot of folk.

It our privilege still as the Church of Jesus Christ to sit with them on the journey and reassure them and hold their hand and encourage them and strengthen them.

In that way, we will indeed leave behind a host of fragrant memories.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister