

Worship service March 7th, 2021, with the Moderator of the General Assembly

Welcome and Introducing the Moderator Rev. Nelu Balaj

Good morning. It is my privilege to welcome you all to this morning worship, on the third Sunday in lent – a special service curated for the Presbytery of West Lothian, with the occasion of the visit by the moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, The Right Rev Dr Martin Fair, to our presbytery. During the week Martin spent time with us in the presbytery, attended our presbytery meeting and visited a number of projects and initiatives in the presbytery.

Unfortunately, due to the current circumstance, the visit took place, virtually, via modern technology, online, as all meetings happen nowadays – but despite the limitations of the technology we have been blessed by his visit and encouraged by his words, and I am sure that he was also blessed and encouraged as he spent time and fellowshiped with us. Today Martin will share with us God's word and through his sermon, he will encourage and challenge us in our call and ministry, here in West Lothian. Unfortunately, Martin cannot deliver his message in person, but he recorded it especially for us.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, it was left to me to introduce Martin to you. Martin was my next-door neighbour in my previous charge in Arbroath for 7 years. As colleagues we met in fellowship with one another and we also worked together on a number of projects, as we ministered to the people of that town. Martin has a very successful and blessed ministry and a vibrant congregation in Arbroath, reaching out and working with some of the most vulnerable people in the town. I am pleased that the prophetic word of someone, predicting Martin as the moderator, has come true, especially at this time when we as a national church need his vision and encouragement to negotiate these uncharted waters. Among other things, Martin enjoys hill walking – I think by now he might have climbed most of Scotland's Munros! He also is a great quiz master – and during the lockdown he has been doing live quizzes on his Facebook page which are attended by hundreds of people – and you can also join him on a Saturday evening on his Facebook page if you like quizzes. Anyway, without further adduce, may I say that I am delighted to have been given the opportunity to introduce Martin to you.

Greeting from the General assembly Rt. Rev. Martin Fair

Good morning everybody. I am Martin and I presently serving as the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. My first task today and my delight is to extend to all of you, that is everyone who ministers, who serves, who worships who is in anyway part of the church across West Lothian, to extend to you the very warmest greetings of the General Assembly.

I have to say I'm so disappointed not to be able to be with you in person. All of my predecessors, those who have served as Moderators before me, they all said to me, you will love the presbytery visits, you get to meet people, you get to see what the church is doing across the land. And so, yes I was looking forward to that and I am bitterly disappointed that my connections are virtual and not in person. But here's the thing, you don't get anywhere just wallowing in disappointment, there are no prizes for that, rather, as we all learned throughout this last year, we've got to make the best of it. We've just got to get on with things. That's what I've been seeking to do as moderator and I hope it's the same for you, as well as you sought to continue the life of the church across your parishes and through the presbytery. Well here we are it's now March and we're heading into the spring and so we do believe that light is coming, that there is light at the end of the tunnel and that is hope

awaiting for us in sprinting time. This we do know for sure that God is with us in every circumstance, that God is faithful through every situation. And so, with all of those things in mind what had joy today to be worshipping God. I'm glad to be with you and I look forward later this service to sharing with you a reflection on God's Word for this day.

Call to worship Rev. Nelu Balaj

Thank you Martin, so let's now take a moment and prepare for worship.

The heavens tell of God's glory
and creation speaks of his goodness.

As day passes into night
night passes into day,
spring follows winter

Let us too, enter now into the tent of God's presence
wherever we are, in worship
to join in the chorus of praise with the whole creation
And so we praise him as we join together to sing

Hymn: Nature shines with beauty

Prayers and Lord's Prayer – Rev. Liam Fraser

Heavenly Father
Maker of heaven and earth
We praise you for the wonder of who you are -
That you are not trapped in the pages of dusty pew bibles
Or entombed in stone sanctuaries, however beautiful,
But are living and active.
Are loosed upon the world
In the bright light of dawn, the bruised colours of dusk
The happy prayer of the grateful,
The cry of those who yearn to start again.

For almost a year now
We as a Presbytery have been separated from our buildings
And driven online,
with some celebrating a new church without walls
And others mourning the anchor of their faith, the one certainty in a world grown dark and
confused.
But whether in church or away from church,
Whether in comfortable routine, or challenging innovation,
Without you, there is no Church,
No true worship, and no hope of life.

And so, Lord,
We your people in West Lothian pray
That your Spirit would enter into our homes,
Our rooms, and our hearts this day,
That you would cleanse us from all impurity,
Strengthen us from all weakness,
And heal us, of wounds conscious and unconscious,

That our hearts and lips might be opened,
And we might give you
The praise that you deserve.

In a moment of silence,
We open the doors of our hearts, our minds, and our memory,
And bring to you our sin, our faults, and our weakness,
Knowing that you love us, and yearn to forgive and help us

Father, we thank that you have forgiven us,
And that in locked house, and lonely room,
Your Spirit is present and moving, with prayers too deep for words.
In our worship today
Help us to see what is hidden in plain sight,
Help us lay hold of what we hoped for, but daren't believe could be possible,
And help us believe that you are everything you say you are,
That our imaginations might be stretched, our horizons enlarged,
And our sense and taste for the wonder of who you are
Might flourish, and grow, and expand.

And with these,
We would sum up all our prayers
By praying together now the words that Jesus taught us:
Our Father
Who art in heaven
Hallowed by thy name.
Thy Kingdom come
Thy will be done
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
And forgive us our debts
As we forgive our debtors,
And lead us not into temptation
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the Kingdom
The power and the glory forever.
Amen

First reading: Psalm 19 – Lynn McEwen

Hymn CH4 154 How Great thou art (Linlithgow Parish church)

Second Reading: John 2:13-22 – Hannah Miller

Sermon – The Moderator Rt Rev Martin Fair

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable and to you Lord, Our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

We're going to reflect for a few moments on that well known passage which is referred to as the cleansing of the temple. We find it there in the reading we had this morning from John's gospel. Of course, it comes pretty near the beginning in John's Gospel, yet it's set much later in the other gospels, but will set aside for now why that might be. It just interests me that John has it in the context of the Passover, Jesus is going to celebrate the Passover here at the beginning of his public ministry, and then at the end of his ministry, when he is with his disciples celebrating, what we now call the Lord supper, before his arrest and trial and crucifixion. That too is set against the backdrop of the Passover. So at the beginning and the end we have Jesus observing the traditions of his people. I think it's important to say that because in the passage of course we have the turning of the tables that driving out of the market sellers. It seems that Jesus is intent on tearing up all of those traditions. Well of course something had gone wrong in what was going on in the temple, but that shouldn't be taken to mean that Jesus was getting rid of all that was dear to his people. Far from it. Throughout the whole of the gospel pictures, we have Jesus very much faithfully observing the ways of his people. It seems to me that as a church now, as we try to embrace what we described a couple of years ago as a radical plan, that in embracing the radical, it doesn't mean that we throw away everything that was. It is much that can continue to enrich our lives. So we need to dig deep into the traditions of our people, and to see what will sustain us as we go forward. Of course there are things that we would be better to leave behind, but there are things too which will be important as we go forward.

Well the passage, of course, takes us to the temple. Jesus has gone there. People would have been gathered from all places. And we read that he sees what's going on there by way of selling and marketing and so on. And he fashions for himself whip made out of cord or rope. It strikes me as interesting that he took the time to do that. It was a thoughtful response, in other words, to what was going on. It wasn't that he had a whip in his back pocket and in a moment of rage and he pulled it out. No. The text tells us that he made a whip for himself to drive out those who were selling and, as it were, defiling the temple. He took his time and what he was doing before responding. I wonder if there is a wee lesson for life in that. I wonder if somethings we fly off the handle without thinking about what we're doing. Whatever else Jesus was doing that day it wasn't a moment of thoughtless rage. Rather it was carefully considered. He describes the temple thus: he says to the people gathered there you've made it on marketplace. You made it a marketplace. Now if you're going to Matthew's gospel you hear that spell that little more. Jesus says it should be a House of prayer and you've made it into a marketplace. I wonder if people today think of our churches as houses of prayer. I mean if you were to go around your wider communities, if you were to stop people in the street, people perhaps not familiar with church, and if you were to point to a church building and ask them, what goes on in there? Do you think the first thing they would say is, 'well tat's a house of prayer. People gather there to pray.' I'm not sure that would be top of people's lists. Somethings we've only got ourselves to blame for that. Some years ago, I was driving through Dundee. I won't be any more specific than that. But as I was coming up one particular road, there was a church before me. The scene was dominated by a large vinyl banner. And on that banner, it said this: jumble sale every Saturday. What message did that banner give out? What would people think as to the activities of that church?

You see somethings were so focused on our activities that perhaps the whole business of being a house of prayer is masked or somehow put into the background, or on our websites, or on notice boards, if we still have such a thing. We are keen to make a list of all that's on. Monday morning toddlers, Tuesday afternoon guild, Wednesday sale of work, Thursday coffee morning and on and on it goes. A hive of activity. Is there room in there for our churches to be houses of prayer?

When you look into the New Testament you see that prayer was so central to the life of the early church. I love the early parts of the book of Acts it gives a wonderful description of the church in Jerusalem as it was for those first believers. We hear that they met frequently together in one another's houses. That they shared table fellowship together. That they celebrated bread and wine together. That they learned from the apostles. That they shared things in common so that those in need didn't go without. That was the life of the church. But central to it, and as we read time and time again, they met frequently to pray. Everything that they did was started in prayer. When they faced a challenge, they got together to pray about it. Prayer was all over the life of the early church. Can it be said of the church today? Does this describe the life of your congregation today? Do people think of your church and think of it as a house of prayer?

I long for the church in Scotland to be all that it can be. I long for the church to be central in the life of our country. I long for it to be that folks of all across the nation from all walks of life all look to the church as a place of hope, as a place to find meaning and purpose in life, as a place of healing and reconciliation and as a place where the presence of God is to be found. I long for that.

Let me use some other language and say: I long for a revival in the church across this nation. Not for the sake of the church in itself, but so that God maybe known again, most fully across this nation. When you trace back the history of revivals, and lets just use one example, the Hebrides revival in the late 40s. you find that that the revival was preceded by faithful prayer. The people were on their knees before God calling out to him. There is a wonderful verse in the book of 2nd Chronicles, in the Old Testament, and we have it like this. If my people will humble themselves, if they will seek my face, if they will pray, if they will turn from their wicked ways, then, then I will come to them. I wonder if we need again to find ourselves on our knees in prayer. Might it be that a season of prayer lies before us. Oh, yes individually in our devotions, but also together in our churches, so that our churches might be known as houses of prayer primarily, before any of the activity that comes thereafter. Jesus certainly saw the temple as a place that was supposed to be dedicated to God and a place where people met God and yes, a House of prayer. Anything that gets the way of that has to be questioned. And so that's why Jesus drove out those market sellers who were, of course, offering their doves and different animals that could be bought and be used for sacrifices, because all of that somehow was getting in the way. And somehow was acting as a barrier for ordinary folks to come into the temple and there to encounter God, and there to pray to god and meet God.

I wonder if Jesus was to come into our churches today, what would be that he would want to clear away? What would he say, we have no use of this? What would he cleanse from our churches? Now I can't answer that for your particular congregations. That's up to you to do a very careful examination. To look at everything that you do as a church and to ask, is this needed? Is this necessary or is this in fact getting under way of people's search for God. If so, then let us be repentant of that. I'd like us to be prepared to put aside that which might act as a stumbling block, that which might be a barrier to people getting close to God.

You know, we become in our churches very, very familiar with our way of doing things. Just the way it is, isn't it? This is the culture of our congregation, this is just the way we do things. But might it be that some of those ways, some of those things we do are difficult for other people and make it harder for other people to find their way into the life of the church and therefore finding themselves closer to God. We need to be ready to examine everything about our congregations and to ask ourselves if it's time for it to be cleared. I think we have an ideal opportunity to do something of that, not just congregations actually but across the whole of the denomination. To do a kind of re-prioritisation service. This is a moment, as we begin to think about what church would look like on

the far side of the pandemic, to ask what do we want it to look like; how can it more truly conform to a church that would be pleasing to our Lord and saviour.

Now is the time to be asking questions. The reopening of churches will be upon us soon enough; small numbers to begin with, of course, but then growing and in time, when safe to do so and when the vaccination programme is complete or more or less, we will see our churches open again in more like the sense that we once knew. We will be able to gather again in different ways. It may not approximate or be much like what we knew, but they will be possibilities again. And I want us to be asking the important questions: what will church look like; what will be key and important and crucial. What will be front and centre in the life of our churches, and what do we need to push aside and be done with. Might I encourage the church, individual congregations and more widely, to see yourselves as being houses of prayer, places where people may come and encounter the living God.

I reckon that that must be the starting place if our churches are to become again instruments in the hands of an Almighty God who is not done with Scotland; who has good news for Scotland; who wants that good news proclaimed to the poor; who wants sight for the blind, liberty to the captives. Yes, good news for the people of Scotland and that news to come through the church in preparation for opening. Let's be people of prayer and let churches be houses of prayer. Amen. Thanks be to God.

Prayers of intercession – Rt Rev Martin Fair

Loving Lord, we marvel that you choose to use us, the church, to bring good news to a broken world. And so today we pray for the church as it is found across the whole of the world, across this country and today in particular for the church within the bounds of the presbytery of West Lothian.

We pray for each and every congregation,

those ones which are thriving,

those which are surviving,

and those which are struggling to keep going.

Lord for renewed strength and vision we pray.

You call each one of us to minister rather than to spectate, and yet some are called to particular ministries and we asked a blessing upon them this morning, that you would grant them every necessary gift,

as they seek to lead your church at this time,

as they seek to minister your word,

as they seek to envision mission in such changed circumstances.

We pray a Lord for all those who are office bearers, who serve with gift and ability and experience, session Clarks, treasures, safeguarding officers, Sunday club leaders, those who care for the elderly and the alone, and the isolated, those who are anxious and feel themselves to be very vulnerable in these days. For all who serve Lord through the church we give you thanks.

but in praying for the church we want to pray too for the communities the church serves. You know Lord those needs better even than we do, so open our eyes to see where need lies, and then grant us vision and energy and enthusiasm and all necessary resources that your church might need that meet the needs of the people of our communities in these days; that we might be good news to the poor; that we might be able to proclaim released to the captives, sight to the blind. Equip your church Lord to be the salt of the earth and light for the world as Christ himself is.

So Lord for the presbytery of West Lothian and for the church across its bounds we pray, and we pray confidently because we ask in Jesus' name. Amen

Hymn CH 198 Let us build a house where love can dwell (Livingston Old)

Benediction – Rt Rev. Martin

Now go in peace, and may the blessing of God almighty father son and Holy Spirit be with you and remain with you this day and forever more Amen

Video of the service can be viewed on YouTube by clicking this link <https://youtu.be/5xPrZyxrgn0>