

Songs of Praise and Reflection
on the occasion of the
Closure of Canonbie United Free Church
Sunday 23rd November 2008 – 6pm

Welcome and Intimations

Call to worship

Hymn MP 731 – We love the place, O God

Declaration of Purpose

The time has come for this congregation of Christ's holy church to take leave of this building. It has been dedicated for the ministry of Word and Sacrament. It has provided a refuge and comfort for God's people. It has served this household of faith. Such a moment must always be a time of sorrow, even grief, but it is also a time above all to give thanks, remembering that the witness of the faithful goes on wherever the faithful are to be found. It is the end of a chapter; but it is also the beginning of a new chapter. Let us therefore, as we take our leave of this house, lift up our hearts in thanksgiving.

Prayer of Approach – *ex tempore*

Hymn MP 559 – Praise Him, praise Him

The Story of Canonbie United Free Church – An Excerpt from *Lang Syne in Eskdale* by David Beattie

In 1843, the parish of Canonbie, which at that time had a population of just over 3000, comprising nearly 600 families. Of these families, 516 were connected with the Established Church, which was erected in 1822. the average number of communicants at that time was 805. There was not a single Roman Catholic or Episcopalian family in the whole parish. Following the Disruption, the adherents of the Free Kirk who, it appears, were a considerable number, being unable to obtain sheltered accommodation, met in the open air for public worship in front of a row of cottages. Later, a tent was purchased. This canvas structure was erected on the corner of a peat moss, a piece of barren land which was mainly the habitation of wandering gypsies. The zealous Canonbie folk continued to worship in the canvas 'kirk' for several Sundays hoping to consolidate the congregation before making application for a site upon which to build their Church. The fact that the whole of the land along the Border belonged to the Duke of Buccleuch, reputed to be one of the most fair-minded and kindest of proprietors, gave high hopes that a suitable site on which to erect a permanent building where they might worship, would be granted. Judge their dismay when, without warning, an interdict from the Sheriff was presented to them ordering that the tent be removed; further, that the newly-formed church was prohibited to meet on any part of the Duke's lands. It was a heavy blow. When it descended upon them they cast around but there seemed little hope of taking refuge in neighbouring property, for the far-reaching Buccleuch estates stretched many miles in every direction. Deprived of the liberty of using a patch of barren land, there remained no other resource than the grassy side of the public highway where, under the sheltering trees, the faithful adherents of the Free Church gathered to worship God. Here, in such trying circumstances, exposed to the bitter elements, the congregation met from Sunday to Sunday. Practically all the inhabitants of Canonbie were either in the Duke's employment, or where his dependents, but this circumstance did not deter them from pursuing a course which their inmost being told them was in accordance with the promptings of conscience. These gatherings, too, comprised not only the humbler class, but included some of the leading farmers of the district. At this distant date it is difficult to realise the hardships unflinchingly borne during those trying days; and as the first blasts of winter came upon them a petition was drawn up, signed by 1083 persons asking for a site. Fully half of those who set their names to the parchment were members of the Established Kirk, who, while not siding with those who had left the fold of the Establishment, were anxious to see such a public grievance removed. The petition was sent to the Duke, but the receipt of it was not even acknowledged.

Disheartened and dispirited, but not without hope and faith in God, whose name they sought to honour before that of man, the faithful congregation passed through the rigours of the winter of 1843-44 with an unwavering fortitude which characterises the true spirit of the Scottish Borderer.

The summer following, it became known throughout the parish that Dr. Gordon, of the Free High Church,

Edinburgh, himself a Dumfries-shire man, who stood in the foremost rank of Scotland's most honoured clergymen, was coming to that outcast congregation on the Canonbie wayside to dispense the Lord's Supper. This was news indeed to revive the spirits of those brave people who had borne the bitter conflict in comparative silence. Dr. Gordon was bringing with him three landed proprietors of high social standing, who were also devoted elders of the Church. They would also be joined by Sir Patrick Maxwell, of Springkell, a prominent country landlord.

Intelligence of what was taking place in that isolated corner of the county, (which up to that moment had been treated with such chilly contempt), had reached higher quarters. The Duke's factor was soon on the scene to say that His Grace "could not bear to think that so holy an office [as the sacrament] should be desecrated by being unnecessarily celebrated by the side of the public highway."

The corner of a field was offered, and under the personal supervision of the factor, a gravel pit was cleared out and levelled, the tent brought back and erected on the spot ready for the arrival of the distinguished visitors. From early morning on the appointed Sunday, people flocked along the roads of the surrounding parishes leading to the place where the sacred ordinance of the Lord's Supper was to be celebrated; so that when Dr. Gordon and his friends arrived there was an audience of at least a thousand persons. This place was under the shadow of a large oak tree in a field on the Annan Road in the immediate vicinity of Brockwoodlees farm house. The day was beautifully fine, and the tent providing altogether inadequate to accommodate so great a congregation, the communion tables were spread out on the open field; and here, under the canopy of heaven, the sacred ordinance of the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Carried out under such circumstances, peculiarly solemn and memorable, it made a deep and lasting impression on many that day.

Psalm 106 (CH4 70) – Give praise and thanks unto the Lord

The Story of Canonbie United Free Church – Letter from America

My dear Friends in Canonbie: I am sitting in my office [in North Carolina] on a dreich November day with a picture of Canonbie United Free Kirk on one wall and a drawing of the first communion at the Hollows in 1844 on the other. What memories these two pictures evoke. While the witness of the church has continued for 164 years, my part of that history only covers the last sixty of them. Memories of Sunday School, of being admitted to the Lord's table, of leaving for the mission field, now forty years ago, and memories of saintly men and women who encouraged me to trust the Lord and to follow Him all these years. I am a debtor to saints in Canonbie long forgotten, John Ainsworth, William Armstrong, Robert Graham, William Irving, Matthew Todd, Rev. Gardiner, Robert Hudspith and a host of others.

As November draws to a close, you will celebrate 164 years of faithful witness, the doors of the UF Kirk will close for the last time and you will begin the next part of the journey, this time strengthened by brothers and sisters in Christ who have laboured equally faithfully in the Parish Kirk. Old differences forgotten as we join hands and ask the Lord to make us the people of God in the twenty first century as The United Parish Church. The renewed facilities will allow for greater flexibility in finding new and creative ways in making the old and trusted message relevant to a new generation.

Sixty years ago when I attended Sunday School in Canonbie, everyone, church attenders or not knew the story. Old Testament characters and New Testament parables were familiar to all; alas that is no longer true. Scotland has for the most part lost its spiritual moorings. The task before us is to invade secular space with the saving gospel, to restore not our traditions but the reality of our faith in Christ, what He offers and what He demands, for He remains even in this pluralistic society, the only hope of salvation, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

I commend you all for this enormous step of faith and as you launch out in faith as one united body, be assured that we will continue in prayer for you all and look forward to hearing the exploits you do for the cause of Christ. Pray for us as we continue to equip and train missionaries from many agencies to carry the message around the world.

Partners in the task, **Barrie & Tillie Flitcroft**

Hymn MP 487 (T. Leominster 455) – Not what these hands have done

Reading: Acts 20:17-38 – Lorraine Jardine

Hymn MP 640 – The Church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord

Address

Well, what is to be said on an occasion like this? It is a time as sad as any of the many funerals that have taken place within these walls, a bidding farewell to a dearly-loved friend. Some of you here tonight were baptised in this place; some of you were married here; some of you ordained as elders here – four of you only this morning. Some of you have had life-changing encounters with the living God within these walls, for some of you this has been a home from home. None of these experiences can be dismissed lightly – they are part of your life and will remain so as the doors are closed at the end of worship for the last time. Of course it can be said that the closure of the building will not alter anything – your baptism, your marriage, your ordination, your memories of loved ones, your faith are not taken away. Of course the importance of the history of this church cannot ever be forgotten. Of course there can be rejoicing that the church here has not fizzled out as it has done in so many similar situations across the country – the coming together of the two congregations in Canonbie has brought new strength to the Gospel witness in this place and has enabled the transformation of the parish church building to fit it for the challenges of the 21st century. While none of that eases the pain felt tonight by those for whom this has been a spiritual home for many years, I would like in a few moments tonight just to turn your thoughts to the reason for this building being here.

Paul says to the Ephesian elders as he prepares to bid farewell to them for the last time: 'Now I commit you to God and to the word of His grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.' (Acts 20:32)

The reason for the existence of any church is to make known the Gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ and to build up the faithful in their understanding of the significance of that Gospel in their daily lives. The reason for the formation of Canonbie Free Church in 1843 was that the Established Church had in large part taken its eye off the ball – it was more concerned about its place in society than about the extension of God's Kingdom and the building up of the saints in their most holy faith. The Gospel needed to be much more freely preached and that is why hundreds of our predecessors in this place were prepared to stand out in all weathers to bear witness to Christ.

It is a common feature in small communities up and down the land that the continued existence of a particular congregation (of any denomination) is dependent not on the principles on which it was first established, and in some cases not even on a strong adherence to the Gospel of Christ but simply on the fact that it is *not* the other church. I go to that church simply because I *don't* go to this one; or I go to *this* church purely because I don't go to *that* one.

When we held our final service in the old parish church in January, we bade farewell to a place that had held memories for many people but next Sunday we will return to a place that, despite its virtually unchanged exterior, is unrecognisable inside. The new sits alongside the old and in the same way, some of the pews from here on which you are sitting tonight are going to be made into furniture for the building down the hill. The differences between the two churches in Canonbie have long ceased to be spiritual ones and as a result the Gospel has been squeezed out of both.

When any of us loses sight of the Word of God's grace and stops seeking to be built up in the faith, a nail is hammered in to the long-term survival of any congregation. While ministers have a significant role in shaping the church through their preaching and their leadership, it is incumbent upon every member of the church to play their part. In Canonbie we have a huge opportunity at this time to advance the Kingdom of God – the building development that has been made possible through the association of the United Free and Parish Church congregations has tremendous potential for growth. However, if we put all our hopes into bricks and mortar, whether they are old, traditional and familiar or whether they are new and strange, we will be setting out on a path as a church that will lead to further decline. In the future, people will look back on the fact that 40 or 50 people gathered at church on Sundays with as much astonishment as we consider the hundreds who gathered in both churches a century and a half ago.

Let us commit one another to God and to the word of His grace which can build us up and give us an inheritance among the saints. As Paul says here: 'I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.' He speaks about serving the Lord in humility and preaching the whole Gospel in words and through our lives. The buildings, the traditions, the denominations – they come and go. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Prayer of Response

For all the saints who, in times past and present, have formed a congregation of your people and have met in this place to offer their prayers and praises to you, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For those who came here as children to learn of you and to be received within your covenant of grace, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For the young who have grown in you and matured in you, and have been challenged by your claims, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For those who have come together in marriage, have rejoiced in your gift of children, and have learned to know you better in learning to love each other more truly, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For those who have taught in Sunday School and for all who have learned from one another and from you, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For the ministers, elders, members of boards and committees, for musicians and choir members, for members of the Guild, of societies and groups, all who have given their time and talents for the work and worship of this church, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For the knowledge that your church continues and that the work of the people of this congregation continues, **we praise you, Creator God.**

For the common life of this congregation, for the special occasions and the ordinary, for joys and sorrows, opportunities and challenges, for all these things and more, **we praise you, Creator God.**

We pray for this congregation of your people: help them to know that when they leave this place they do not leave your presence; and when they go out from this building they do not leave the Church. And now in the unity of faith, in the communion of saints, in love and goodwill to all, in remembrance of those who built and maintained this place, we dedicate ourselves anew in the service of your Kingdom; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Hymn MP 757 – When peace, like a river, attendeth my soul

Offering and Prayer of Dedication

Hymn MP 170 – Give thanks with a grateful heart (seated)

Leave-Taking

We leave this place where we have felt God's presence near. We know He dwells not only in temples made with human hands, but also in the hearts of those who give Him room. We therefore pray:

ALL - Come, fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we may be your temple, and when we go from here, may worship you in spirit and in truth, with a new vision of your glory, a new experience of your power, and a new joy in your service. Amen

Hymn MP 109 – Crown Him with many crowns

(Weather-permitting, we will leave the church singing and the benediction will be given outside.)

Benediction