

ONE UNITARIAN'S THOUGHTS on the POPE'S VISIT to SCOTLAND - Roddy Macpherson GUC - 7th MARCH

'Christian is my name, and Catholic my surname. I grant that you are a Christian as well as I, and embrace you, as my fellow disciple in Jesus. And if you are not a disciple of Jesus, still I would embrace you as my fellow man.'

These words, spoken at the lighting of our chalice at the service on 7th March, were by - and placed in 1804 upon the memorial to - Alexander Geddes (1737-1802). He was a Scottish Roman Catholic priest and theologian who, notwithstanding the differences of opinion on religion, became friends with Joseph Priestley and others amongst the leading Unitarians of the day. The closing words at the service came from Dr. Geddes's *A Letter to the Reverend Dr. Priestley, in which the Author attempts to prove . . . that the Divinity of Jesus Christ was a primitive Tenet of Christianity*:

'I cannot allow myself to believe that the divinity of Jesus will ever be without defenders . . . but let its defenders be mild and moderate; let them imitate the conduct of him whose cause they undertake to plead. . . . To discover Truth is professedly the aim of us all: let us pursue the path that seems the most likely to lead us to her abode, with ardor but not with animosity; and if we be convinced that we have been happy enough to find it out, let us not insult those who, in our estimation, may have been less successful.'

The theme of the 7th March service was "One Unitarian's thoughts on the Pope's visit to Scotland". We read from Pope Benedict's recent speech in Rome to the Bishops of Scotland, in which he announced his "joy of being present with you and the Catholics of Scotland on your native soil" in September; in the same speech he had spoken of "the great rupture with Scotland's Catholic past that occurred four hundred and fifty years ago". That remark had prompted some controversy: according to news reports, the Pope's reference to the forthcoming anniversary of the Reformation in Scotland led the Church of Scotland to claim the Pope's remarks would promote the idea that marking the Reformation would be seen as anti-Catholic (*The Scotsman*, 2nd March).

In my idiosyncratic way, I had a trinity of Geddeses in my address: Dr. Alexander Geddes, Bishop John Geddes (1735-99) (Alexander's cousin and Roman Catholic bishop who resided in Edinburgh) and Jenny Geddes - whose outburst on 23rd July 1637 against the reading of the new prayer book in St. Giles's gives her very name to a tradition of fierce Scottish resistance to hierarchies and authorities in religion. My evident Glaswegian warmth in welcoming Pope Benedict's visit had something of the effect of intoning dangerous words in the ear of one hearer on 7th March. "I'm not going to throw a stool," she assured me; but in her written response to what I had been saying, she asked me very directly, "Whose side are you on? As chairman of G.U.C. are you saying that you are a 'friend' to the Catholic Church?" In the course of the message I was asked, "Do you agree with Catholic beliefs and practices? Is it still possible to be 'friends' with a religious group which is trying to impose its beliefs and practices on others?" Happily, we both agreed that the following text of my reply might be of interest to others in explaining my approach to the theme.

Dear Jenny,

Thank you for your message. You have much more experience of Roman Catholicism in action than I, as is evident from all that you write. I am sorry that it is part of an unhappy story for you at the moment. I mentioned that my position is that my personal experience of life has left me neutral: I personally have neither been uplifted nor oppressed by Roman Catholicism. I could not possibly be an apologist for any of the faults that you mention.

My starting point was that I acknowledged my sometime state of prejudice against the Roman Catholic church in Scotland, as being an alien force. My subsequent thinking - much following desultory researches in eighteenth century sources - has allowed me to understand that, in this

period, the priests in the Scottish Mission and the adherents to Roman Catholicism in Presbyterian Scotland were a small and oppressed minority. I think something of the heroic can indeed be thought of them, in their adversity. It would certainly have been clear from what I said - for example, by quoting Robert Burns's high admiration of Bishop Geddes, the support of Catholics for subscriptions to publication of Burns's poems, and the inclusion of numerous Roman Catholic clergy amongst the membership of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland - that I thought some of the Roman Catholic influence in that era a positive force for good, even without considering their charitable works. I do not doubt that the Relief Act of 1793 was a statute much to be approved of by Unitarians (who were to benefit from their own Relief Act in 1813).

My references to Scalan - the ladder that rose from Glenlivet in 1716 - were designed to counter the quotation from the 1932 book's article by the Rev. Dr. Warr that Roman Catholic influence in Scotland was really just because of Irish immigration. The twelfth century status of Glasgow as a "special daughter" of the Roman See reminds one of the Roman Catholic church's historically accurate claim to be recognised as a central influence in the history of our national story - a story which cannot properly be claimed as the special province of the "National" church, the Church of Scotland - which may, or may not, be the Established Church in this land. (On balance, I think it is still Established, in terms of 1707 and All That.)

The quotations from Alexander Geddes were the significant ones; mentioning Jenny Geddes as having the same name was just my way of emphasizing how, within our little country, the same tribe of Scots has set itself, sometimes violently, at the very extremes of religious disputes. I did think Alexander Geddes's statements, as quoted, admirable; I did think it significant and uplifting that he, while enjoying the friendship of the most distinguished Unitarians of his day, while contributing to the very same journals which sought to advance the cause of a rational basis for religion and a greater freedom of conscience of the individual, nonetheless felt he could keep his own Catholic "surname". Had Geddes, by engaging with Priestley in argument, discovered himself a Unitarian, my point could not have been made. This it is: Geddes's message of courtesy and tolerance in discussions of religious disagreements should always be truly useful.

As I think you do acknowledge, I was speaking as "one Unitarian", not in a representative capacity. However, in showing the photograph of the papal medal of 1982, commemorating Pope John Paul II's visit to Scotland, I could have made clear my understanding that its recipient, Alex. Dand, either as chairman or representative of Glasgow Unitarian Church, was acting in a representative capacity. With such a precedent, I do not doubt that a visit by the next pope to Glasgow would indeed much be welcomed in GUC, particularly in our own bicentennial year. In the historic year of 1982 our predecessors evidently felt no need to join voices in denunciations of "The Beast"!

Finally, it was by the finding of personal connection with some of these old Catholics, and the joy in the discovery of a wonderful amount of detailed information on their lives, that I tried to show how personal sympathy is the force that destroys prejudice, without rendering the discoverer credulous. It is the same sympathy for the individual which made Bishop Geddes's taking up residence in Edinburgh in 1780 - so recently the scene of anti-Catholic riots - an opportunity for peaceful change in Scotland. It was Pope John Paul II's ability to connect with so many on his visit to Glasgow in 1982 that makes it still such a memorable occasion. I think we should wish Pope Benedict XVI all success in emulating that success, or else our Glasgow Welcome must be dishonest.
