

St Andrew's Day 'State of the Nation' Lecture
St Giles Cathedral Edinburgh, 30 November 2018
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An audio file of the lecture and discussion has been posted by the Cathedral [at this link](#).

Good evening.

We are here to mark Saint Andrew's Day, here in the Cathedral of Saint Giles the patron saint of Edinburgh, here at the seat of John Knox, who sparked off the Scottish Reformation in 1560.

At one level, the idea of patron saints in today's world is bonkers. Knox would have used stronger language. In a tempestuous address to the German nobility of 1520 his German predecessor, Martin Luther, said, "One should abolish all saints' days, keeping only Sunday."

"My reason is this," he continued. "With our present abuses of drinking, gambling, idling, and all manner of sin, we vex God more on holy days than on others."

But even Luther concedes that there may have been a time before, as he put it, corrupt clergy "abused the goods of the Church so as to gain the goods of the world," that some of these figures might have served a valid purpose.

The personage of a saint can embody an archetypal patterning of spiritual truth. A simple story, a life compressed into a parable, can open layers and layers of depth.

What do I mean by an archetypal patterning? I'm talking about patterns of the mind that can endure, beyond reason but not beyond rhyme, and so recurring and reverberating down the corridors of time.

As a poem by the Welsh priest R.S. Thomas has it, "The parish/ has a saint's name time cannot/ unfrock."

We are seated here on ground once consecrated to Saint Giles.

Who was he, and what his business in our subject matter for tonight?

Legend holds that Giles was a seventh century wandering hermit. He left his native Athens, and retreated to a secret cave deep in the forest, by the banks of the Gardon near where it flows past Nimes in southern France.

He lived on a vegetarian diet and his sole companion was a hind, a female deer. It's said that God had sent her to give nourishment, both of her milk and of her companionship.

One day the king was out a-hunting. He spotted the saint's deer peacefully at her grazing, sounded the horn in hot pursuit, and the terrified beast fled for safety, making to the cave where its companion prayed.

Just as it reached the hidden cleft amongst the cliffs, the king let loose his arrow.

It missed, but struck instead the saint; some say to his hand, others that it was his leg.

Either way, Giles declined the ministrations of the king's physician. Instead, he rested, as on a crutch, on God's words of fortification to Saint Paul: "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness."

So it was that Giles became the patron saint of cripples. Or, as might be said today, the patron saint of disability.

By coming to terms with our limitations, by reaching for an inner power, a greater wholeness can emerge. A wholeness that transcends outer obstacles. A power that cannot be diminished by brute force.

That is the form of power for which Saint Giles stands. Carvings of him, with his beloved deer, can be found at prominent places around this very church.

After the Reformation, the saint himself was dropped from the city seals. But curiously, his deer remains. To this day it supports the shield upon the Coat of Arms of the City of Edinburgh Council.

Why did King David dedicate this church Saint Giles in 1124? His was a cult that swept Europe, the way medieval saints were prone to do. But I cannot help but notice a pairing with the king's legendary vision while out hunting in what is now called Holyrood Park.

The vision of the white stag, with the Holy Rood – the cross of Christ – blazing in its antlers.

The Holy Rood, the *Haly Ruid* in Scots, is today our Scottish Parliament, our *Holyrood*.

And there you see it. "The parish/ has a saint's name time cannot/ unfrock."

These archetypal patternings of story - it doesn't greatly matter whether make-believe or based on truth - convey hidden meanings. They speak symbolically to deeper levels of the mind.

Today, Saint Giles invites us to inquire into the nation. In its health and its affliction. In its outer powers and hidden powers within ... you see ... this is how old Giles can speak to us. He reminds us when we maybe need them, of those hidden powers of grace within.

And so we're here in Saint Giles' Cathedral, consecrated by a Scottish king, here on Saint Andrew's day.

And I'm mindful that tonight's lecture is in partnership with BEMIS, the organisation of black and ethnic minorities in Scotland. Let me try and open windows on Saint Andrew. [Who was this Andrew](#), stitched by our medieval forebears to the very flag of Scottish nationhood?

Like Giles, the cult of Andrew was another of those that swept medieval Europe. His bones, or bits of them, supposedly migrated from Patras in Greece, to St Andrew's in Scotland, causing the Fife town to become a pilgrimage route second only to Compostela at the time of King David's mother, Queen Margaret, just after the Norman conquest of England.

Having him as patron saint gave political gravity to a Scotland that was still in the process of political consolidation.

What might be his message for our times, now that Holyrood has declared his day a public holiday courtesy of the *St Andrew's Day Bank Holiday (Scotland) Act 2007*?

On the surface of it, not a lot. He pops up less than a dozen times in the gospels, mostly just in passing mentions. His biggest claim of fame was to be the first called of Jesus' disciples.

He'd been a follower of that splendidly anti-establishment figure, John the Baptist - a "voice crying out in the wilderness."

He and his brother Simon Peter left behind their fishing nets when Christ said to them, "Follow me ... I will make you fishers of men." Of what runs deepest in the human spirit.

Those words can be found inscribed on the outer stainless steel doors of Saint Andrew's House, our offices of government here in Edinburgh.

He goes on to inform Jesus of the lad with the expandable lunch at the feeding of the five thousand, and he serves a modest ambassadorial role by helping visiting Greeks, which is to suggest, foreigners, to have an audience with Jesus. And that's about it.

So how do we account for Andrew's cultic popularity? What made our forebears rank him so highly – the patron saint not just of Scotland, but also in the Orthodox lands of Greece and Russia?

The answer lies not just in the Biblical accounts. It lies also in oral traditions and texts dating to the late second century, a version of which, a long Old English poem called the *Andreas*, was circulating in Britain from around the end of the tenth century.

Only recently have the early texts been pieced back together from fragmentary sources by scholars working independently in France and the United States.

The stories thereby made plain to us now, told respectively in *The Acts of Andrew* and *The Acts of Andrew and Matthias in the City of the Cannibals*, are suitably blood curdling.

After Jesus' crucifixion, Andrew evangelised Achaea, while Saint Matthais (or Matthew, the replacement of Judas) headed off for Myrmidonia - the "city of the cannibals".

The Myrmidonians arrested him, gouged out his eyes, and imprisoned him for thirty days of fattening-up. But Andrew, guided by Christ disguised as a sailor, got there just in time, and converted the miscreant heathen.

He then took off on a long pilgrimage round the Black Sea, the area known in ancient times as Greater Scythia. He ended up in Patras, today the regional capital of Western Greece, where he proceeded to evangelise the family of Aegeates, the Roman proconsul.

First, he converted Stratocles, the proconsul's brother, whose name meant "Battle-Praise". The warrior, like a number of other Roman soldiers under Andrew's influence, laid down his arms and became committed to nonviolence.

But what most irked Aegeates, was when his wife, Maximilla, joined the converts and went on sex strike.

Why? Because Andrew told her that she no longer had to endure her husband's rooster-like advances when he came home drunk each night.

He affirmed her in her dignity, in her radiance of body and soul. He said: "I recognise that you are more powerful than those who presume to dominate you; more distinguished than those who cast you down to shame, than those who lead you away to captivity."

The jealous and sexually frustrated proconsul arrested Andrew, accusing him that, "She now rejoices in you and your God!"

He had no patience for this fledgling patron saint of #MeToo.

According to the early manuscripts, Aegeates "... commanded that Andrew be flogged with seven whips. Then he sent him off to be crucified and commanded the executioners not to impale him with nails but to stretch him out tied up with ropes, and to leave his knees uncut, supposing that by so doing he would punish Andrew even more cruelly."

The point being, that if the legs of a crucified person were broken at the knees, the strain fell on the arms and chest, resulting in a quicker and more merciful death by suffocation.

So it was that Andrew died on a saltire-shaped cross at Patras. Its first clearly established use here was on the Great Seal of the Guardians of Scotland of 1286, with the motto: "Andrew, be leader of your compatriots, the Scots."

But why compatriots? Where was that coming from? This is where, in addition to being as we might now see it, a patron saint of nonviolence, and a patron saint of a woman's right to say "no", we might think of Andrew as a patron saint of multiculturalism.

A raft of medieval texts and traditions held that the Scots and Irish – our Gaelic-speaking elements of nationhood - had originated in Greater Scythia, the area of Andrew's evangelisation, that we now think of as the north and eastern Black Sea regions of the Ukraine, Southern Russia, Georgia and beyond.

So, what's to do with Scythia?

Scotland's charter text, the *Declaration of Arbroath*, was drafted in 1320 as our claim of right before the Pope to be a nation. It was needed, because the late Edward "Longshanks" of England had used a dubious history, knitted together by Geoffrey of Monmouth, to make out that the English had a feudal right to rule it over Scotland.

How could Scotland's nobles trounce that claim? They wrote a stronger charter text.

With evidence mustered by Baldred Bisset of Kinghorn, they wrote that, "... from the chronicles and books of the ancients we find that among other famous nations our own, the Scots, has been graced with widespread renown."

It continued: "They journeyed from Greater Scythia by way of the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Pillars of Hercules, and dwelt for a long course of time in Spain among the most savage tribes, but nowhere could they be subdued by any race, however barbarous."

It concluded that, with such a pedigree, the Scottish people were confirmed in their faith by none other than "... the most gentle Saint Andrew."

"Even though settled in the uttermost parts of the earth," this epic history reveals that Scots were called, "almost the first to His [Christ's] most holy faith."

The most elaborate version of the medieval Scythian origin myth is found in the twelfth century *Lebor Gabala Eirenn*, the Irish *Book of Invasions*.

It tells how Fenius the Scythian, a descendent of Noah who lived in Eastern Scythia, an area that could mean anywhere from modern Georgia to Iran or even Kazakstan, had a son called Nel, a brilliant linguist. (Elsewhere his multiple names include Gaodhal Glas, Gadelius and Gaytheloos).

After the fall of Nimrod's Tower of Babel, the original language of Eden (which we all know was Gaelic) got fragmented into the seventy-two languages of the world.

Such was the confusion, that Pharaoh Cineris summoned Nel to be his linguist.

Not all was happy in Cineris' Egypt, however. His daughter, Scotas, had something going with Nel, and Nel was pally with Aaron, the brother of Moses, with the whiff of revolution in the air.

On the day the Israelites fled to their Promised Land in the East, Nel, Scotas and the rest of their Scythian Scots including Caicher their druid hotfooted it, at Aaron's suggestion, in Pharaoh's small fast boats to seek out their own promised land in the West.

For three hundred years they voyaged. At one stop they came upon "a spring with the taste of wine" and the whole lot fell asleep for three days ... and we'd never have had a Scotland today, had not Caicher with his gift of foresight gone tee-total, and woke them up to sally on.

It's interesting that in Georgia there was an ancient Kingdom of Ibernica with oral traditions claiming links to Spain; for they sailed on, stopping for a long period in Iberia, and then to Ireland, the Latin name for which was Hibernica.

According to the Scotichronicon, the fifteenth century Scottish Chronicle, they stopped awhile at the Hill of Tara, then carried on across the Irish Sea to Scotland, bringing with them Jacob's Pillow stone.

That stone, from the original Genesis 28 version of *Stairway to Heaven*, is now our *Stone of Destiny* just up the road from here, in Edinburgh Castle.

You see the connections, and our forebears would, I think, allow us further to expand – the Kingdom of Ibernica to Iberia to Hibernica and so a direct line of descent all the way to Hibs football club here in Edinburgh.

Pardon my excesses (they're mild compared to this psychohistory, this psychological history, I can assure you), because the most important point, is that Scotas, Nel's wife and Pharaoh's daughter, gave her name to Scotland.

It must be true, because the Scotichronicon has a picture of her arriving on the boat.

And in 2016, researchers at the Universities of Dublin and Queens, Belfast, jointly published in [a paper with the US Academy of Sciences](#) their genetic findings from sources including bronze age skeletons. They mention these origin myths as found in what they call "the oldest Gaelic literature," and conclude:

It is clear that the great wave of genomic change which swept from above the Black Sea into Europe around 3000 BC washed all of the way to the northeast shore of its most westerly island.

And so, it seems we are, indeed, "all Jock Tamson's bairns."

And the mother of the Scottish nation, *was black*.

Ahhh - I feel like Caicher the Druid is calling for a little celebration at this point.

A lyric, perhaps, by Kathy Galloway of the Iona Community:

It's not in the mountains and glens,
 though beautiful they are for sure,
Nor the myths and the songs of the past,
 though they also have their allure,
Nor even the causes for pride,
 the struggles we've had to endure,
It's the women of Scotland who move me,
 and give me the love of this land.

And because we're talking both mythological storytellers and our contemporary poets, a Hadith, perhaps: a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him):

God has treasures beneath the throne,
the keys whereof are the tongues of poets.

Because Andrew was a fisherman who answered to a deeper poetry of life than just prosaic chattering about the price of fish.

In looking at the state of the nation, where do we limp, and where might we be reaching a strength "made perfect", even from out of relative weakness?

To contain my task but to give a flavour for the way I view the Scotland of today, let me focus on just three interwoven issues: climate change, poverty and violence.

Climate change is the biggest issue facing every nation on the planet. It's already causing loss of human life and species. As the protestors of Extinction Rebellion are reminding us, extinction is a crime against all time.

Greenhouse gas emissions are driven by both the level of population, and the level of material consumption.

The rich like to blame the poor. "If only there were less of them."

But the poor know that the rich consume many times as much as they do.

The politicians tell us that we can't afford to do this, we can't afford to do that. But look at what is squandered by the rich, on trivia.

Look at what is sitting in the car park.

Look at what is moored down at the marina.

Look at the trophy mansions on the hilltops.

“There’s room at the top/ they are telling you still/ but first you must learn/ how to smile as you kill.”

I define consumerism as consumption in excess of what is needed for dignified sufficiency in life.

The Scottish Government has been relatively proactive on dangerous global warming. But it’s not just governments or corporations that we must understand.

We must better understand ourselves and why it is, that when you step outside of this cathedral, you’d never think that Christmas is a time we celebrate a brown-skinned infant refugee to Egypt.

Throughout the 20th century, corporate marketeers have exploited the tools of wartime propaganda and turned it on the people.

The “depth boys”, as they were known in the advertising industry, drew on depth psychology. They appropriated insights from the likes of Freud, Jung and Adler that were intended as a healing for the suffering of the soul, and turned them into exploitation.

They’ve hooked into our deepest hopes and fears, into the structure of desire itself, exploiting what we might think of as Microsoft security vulnerabilities within the human psyche.

Notice how it’s a two-way thing. The outer blandishments interact as a system with the inner weaknesses. The result drives a climate-catastrophic economy, one that seeks to multiply wants and not just satisfy fundamental human needs.

The UN estimates two hundred million climate refugees on the move by 2020. The upper estimates run as high as a billion as living spaces in the world collapse.

“We can’t take in more refugees,” those soaked in plenty say, those who are the biggest drivers of the problem.

“We can’t take any more in, or there won’t be enough to go round.”

Well, that depends on what kind of a people we want to be. What depth of a vision we have for an inclusive sense of identity and belonging. What it means to be “a real Scot”, in the shoes of Andrew the fisherman.

The disciples came running to Jesus saying they didn’t have enough money to buy food for all the five thousand.

It was Saint Andrew who brought to Jesus the lad with the five small loaves and two small fishes.

You can read what happened next as a miracle of magic, Jesus as a paranormal conjurer.

Or you can read it as a miracle of grace, the common wealth of sharing.

Either way, Andrew, who had given up on chattering about the price of fish, landed for them all a catch of kindness.

I don't have hope for how we deal with climate change, or climate refugees, or species that are going extinct - if viewed only in monetarist terms.

But if we can snap, snap - wake up out of the consensus trance reality in which the hoddenn consciousness of most of us just drifts along, then I can see how this challenge will raise us to a higher level of humanity.

The surname of the black feminist writer, Alice Walker, comes from Scotland. I can't remember what she said about it, but I'd guess it goes back to the days of slavery. She points a way towards a higher humanity, beyond crass consumerism.

We alone can devalue gold
by not caring
if it falls or rises
in the marketplace....

Feathers, shells
and sea-shaped stones
are all as rare.

This could be our revolution:
to love what is plentiful
as much as
what's scarce.

And so, to poverty. I came through today from Govan, a hard-pressed part of Glasgow. Through austerity, the poor are being made to pay the price of the profligacy of the rich.

After the financial crash of 2008, we could have creamed it off the rich whose politics had driven the deregulation of banking.

But now ... austerity levelled on the poor ... it's like I was coming out of the Brechin Bar last week, and I saw this young man just standing there on the other pavement, and I went over and asked if he was OK.

He asked if I had a fag, and said he hadn't eaten.

What would that young man have had to live on?

Under 25's (if on Universal Benefit) get £252 a month. That's £8.40 a day, food, clothing, heat and light, the lot.

Some of them - 13,000 benefit claimants a year in Scotland alone – have been “sanctioned”, which if we get round the Orwellian double-talk, means *punished* for missing a meeting, or whatever.

Westminster is not devolving sanctioning to Scotland where our government is attempting to build "respect and dignity" into the system.

Even ten years ago, I could have said to a young man like the one on the pavement, “Get a job, even if it's sitting at a till in ASDA.”

Now ... well, put it this way. There's a young man in our street, I've known him since we went and caught the tadpoles for a pond that I'd dug.

He's training to become a commercial driver. But in three years' time, they're bringing in driverless buses across the Forth Road Bridge.....

We have to ask what human beings are for. We have to ask what gives dignity, *what gives life*.

One answer, because I am not bereft of hope, is land reform.

In Scotland, the poor may have no lawyers, but they have a government.

I have to accept that there are differences of opinion around Scottish independence, and around Brexit.

There will be differences in this cathedral tonight. But let's put it this way.

If we're ever going to be an independent country, then as Lesley Riddoch says, we have to be prepared within ourselves.

That's why, for me, modern Scottish land reform is such a barometer of the state of the nation.

We now have more than 400 community groups, holding 530,000 acres of land. That's 2.8% of the surface of the nation, and a £10 million a year Scottish Land Fund to try and reach the million acres target by 2020.

Community land trusts tackle poverty in part by cutting out the speculative market for building plots, and enabling self-build or social housing.

They stimulate entrepreneurship, like the business units set up by the North Harris Trust, or the Isle of Eigg's brewery.

And they simultaneously slash carbon footprints, and pour money directly into communities by activating renewable energy.

On Loch Poll, the Assynt Crofters' Trust hydro electric scheme generated £40,000 in 2016.

The Point and Sandwick Trust on the Isle of Lewis have just three average-sized wind turbines, generating nine megawatts. On Wednesday of this week they won the UK's Environmental Social Enterprise of the Year Award. In the past year, the profits from their turbines gave to local charities ... eight hundred thousand pounds.

So that's housing, enterprise, energy ... and the fourth huge benefit of land reform is psychological. It tackles the idea that we're too wee, and too small, to do anything about our condition. It's giving grassroots people a sense of can-do.

I was on the Isle of Luing last week, and one of their people, Jane Churchill, was heading up to the Isle of Eigg the next day to learn from them.

Community Land Scotland, backed by the Scottish Government, will shortly be running teach-ins in Manchester, for English folks, and in Govan, for urban folks.

Irrespective of the macro political questions such as Independence and Brexit, if the meek are going to inherit the Earth, *the meek must be getting ready*.

The Greek word in the gospels, translated "meek", is *praus*.

It means "the gentle strong."

That gentle strength – the strength of Giles and Andrew, the strength of many unsung women saints and saints of colour – is what we need to make a human future.

Remember, Andrew and his brother, Saint Peter, left their boats and nets beside the Sea of Galilee. They followed after Christ, who stopped, and asked of them the bottom line atomic depth charge question.

"What seek ye?"

What do you most truly desire?

And he answered unto them: "Follow me."

"For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.... Truly I tell you,

whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.”

I said I’d take three case studies; so, lastly, violence.

At one level, the state of Scotland is encouraging.

Last night I was at a community gathering in Govan with retired Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan.

Once the boss of Glasgow’s murder squad, he pioneered, along with colleagues such as Karyn McCluskey who is now the head of Community Justice Scotland, the Violence Reduction Unit of our police force.

In back-of-the-envelope terms, he tells me that, since 2008, NHS emergency admissions for assault in Scotland have been reduced by half.

Over the same decade, the murder rate fell by almost half, and in Glasgow, weapons-carrying fell by 85%.

Scotland has become a world-renowned model for violence reduction, though John cautioned that our suicide rates still remain stubbornly high. Also, he’s worried about what the stresses of austerity, and perhaps further economic decline, might do as the levels of anxiety in hard-pressed families are forced upwards.

I asked him, hand on heart, how much he thought that the good news of our violent crime statistics was down to the Violence Reduction Unit? That, [and similar initiatives of NHS Scotland](#), building especially on the servant leadership of Sir Harry Burns when he was Chief Medical Officer.

He said that what’s changed in Scotland is, “We’ve shifted the language of violence from crime to health.”

The public health model means less reliance on prisons, and more on going into schools and working with gangs and families and community groups. It’s meant that “violence became everyone’s problem, not just the police.”

The bottom line that John Carnochan left me with for us tonight, is that human beings need relationship. His catch phrase, these days, is, “No matter what the question, the answer is *relationship*.”

On that note, I’ll draw to a conclusion.

The hubris that drives climate change and poverty, is a word that has its origin in the Greek, *hybris*, meaning violence.

Violence is what happens when we lead an egotistical life, a life that overrides relationship or has never had the chance or known how to build it.

Violence is the product of being, for whatever reason, self-centred instead of being centred selves.

It means we're all complicit – me too - if not with specific violence, then with structural violence as part of the normalised fabric of society.

When a people or peoples have been historically colonised, politically disenfranchised, stripped of their land, pushed by whatever galling reason - climate change, war, or multiple forms of destitution - to become migrants to a stranger's country....

When they're cast from early childhood into a race of competitive achievement, when they become cogs in the machine, where the social class system, or sexism, or racism, or any other manifestation of the domination system never gave to each an equal running start ... in all these situations, people have been shaped by violence.

If not to body, then to soul.

As a Glasgow addict said to me, "Heroin took away my pain, Alastair, but it also took away my soul."

The resulting spiral of violence, if not broken, leads to massive denial and psychological complicity in the very systems that we all deplore. These are variations on the Stockholm Syndrome. If you can't beat them, you can but join them.

How do we transform such structural evil, rooted as it is not just out there in "the system", but running through the psyches of every one of us?

Saint Giles and Saint Andrew are patterns and examples.

Their lives reveal a God whose name is life, and not just any old life, but life as love made manifest.

Andrew's ambassadorial roles - with his brother Peter, with visiting "Greeks" or foreigners, and with the feeding of the five thousand - shows us what it means to recreate relationships.

To rekindle true community.

Because the cross of Christ ... the willingness to fully face the world, but not retaliate in kind ... *the cross absorbs the violence of the world.*

Jesus called out violence, in all its hollow bankruptcy.

Peter and Andrew too, each crucified; and Andrew with his nonviolence, seen as being Christ-like in medieval Europe.

As one of our folks in Govan, a guy called Livvy, a street theologian, put it to me: "Hell cannot hold such love as this."

A love that stands outside of space and time.

A life to which the resurrection is intrinsic, because such life is rooted in the very fabric of eternity.

Hell cannot hold such love as this.

That, is the State of the Nation, to which Saint Andrew calls us in our time.

Thank you.

