

## **ST GILES' REORDERING – A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION**

**The Very Revd. Dr. Gilleasbuig Macmillan**

Over the past forty to fifty years, the fabric of St. Giles' in Edinburgh has been renewed, with elements repaired or replaced and changes made. Many people have shared the work and decisions have been made after advice and influence. The Sanctuary (as some of us still call the most sacrosanct part of the church) was moved from the east end to the crossing, under the crown spire. This article concentrates on that reordering.

I was minister in St. Giles' for forty years, from 1973 to 2013, and continue to reflect on what was done. I have also seen links between my life before St. Giles' and my time there. I assume it is fairly normal to find strands bringing the past to the present and connecting them.

In 1973, many visitors came to St. Giles' on weekdays, brought in buses before parking in the High Street was controlled. At times, six busloads of people were in the church, each group addressed by their guides, in a competitive cacophony centred on the crossing. I remember wishing that something could be done to emphasise that this was a sacred place, a place of worship, and I think that my eventual promotion of the crossing as the place for the Holy Table had its roots in that reaction.

I have also looked back to earlier, even childhood experience, and the perception of linking strands bringing together memories from the past and current times.

My early experience of Holy Communion was in the church in Appin, Argyll, where my father was minister. Three memories stand out in my mind. The first is of walking one day to school at the age of 9 or near that, when I was greeted by local businessman, Ronnie Black, who said, 'You shouldn't be going to school today.' The remark threw me a bit, and it was later when I realized that the day was the Thursday before Communion Sunday, the day known as Fast Day, when schools had been shut. It was a reminder of the significance of the Communion Season, for community as well as congregation.

The second memory is an indicator of past practice continued by some in the present when, in the Communion Service, most communicants took their place in the front pews covered in linen when they entered before the start of the service, but some waited in the back pews until the minister bade them come forward, as the elements were brought to the Table. That continuance of taking steps to the place of the sacrament had an impact on me then, and remains. Moving to take your place has been for many people in many traditions important, and remains.

My third memory from Appin may appear to be in conflict with that last point, as it concerns not what we do, but what is done for us, shown us. 'For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come.' (1 Corinthians 11;26) Although I was not yet a communicant, the Manse Pew brought me closer to the Table than most of the communicants were, and the taking of bread and wine and setting them apart moved me then. The shewing of the Lord's death is important. Our recent culture and education encourage activity and participation, possibly to the neglect of the power of demonstration, which is a matter of gift, not achievement, and that has a place in the central prominence of the Holy Table in St. Giles'.

Bringing together these two points, of moving to take your place and receiving the sign of what is given, done for you, the past comes close to the present.

Of course, the unexpected and even the accidental can play an important part in effecting change. An opera on the life of High Miller was composed, and the librettist, Colin Maclean, asked if it could be performed in St. Giles'. The need to remove some of the east end stalls nourished the appeal of space there, and the opera went on, with the big Holy Table brought forward a bit. Some found any alteration of that sort unacceptable, but others looked carefully. Hunter Thomson, Session Clerk, treated the move of furniture with some disfavor, but when he saw the change made and the Table in the new, forward, place, he changed his mind, saying, 'Fools and bairns should not see a job half done.' I think that Hugh Miller played an important part in the development in St. Giles' of the move of the sanctuary to the crossing.

I was keen on processions and invited all present to proceed with hymns on Palm Sunday and Harvest Festival. People were also encouraged to greet strangers

and, of course, it was sometimes the strangers who were more outgoing in their approach than the locals.

Encouragement to move informally and set formal ceremony within community friendship came from a wedding in Corfu, where people milled around the couple, and their parents were nearest to them, and a christening in Lincoln Cathedral, where the congregation in the choir processed to the west end of the nave for baptism, returning to the choir for communion.

Moving to a font near the door for baptism was also what I came to know in St. Michael's, Linlithgow, when I was student assistant and subsequently, probationer. St. Michael's was also where I met Dr. William Mackintosh, exchanging for some weeks with Dr. David Steel, and through him his wife, Ruth, who designed and made the processional cross, which came from New Orleans, Louisiana to St. Giles'.

For some years before I retired, the congregation gathered at the west end, where I baptized (usually) young children.

Thus the way things were done could be seen to reflect the experience of other places, other times, and the use of the space assisted in honouring both the actions of worship and the character of the place.

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