



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Pentecost Sunday 23rd May 2021

Readings: Acts 2.1-4, Ezekiel 37.1-10, John 15.26-27



Cheyenne Moccasins

Judge Softly, Mary Lathrap's famous 1895 poem, suggests that there is wisdom in not presuming to judge or even understand another person until you have walked a mile in their moccasins: that way we

*'slip into [their] mind and traditions,
and see the world through [their] spirit and eyes'.*¹

So it was that I spent half an hour last week sitting in church, as if I was wearing the moccasins of those of you about to be inducted as elders. What does becoming an elder at this time look like, when seen through your spirit and eyes? Of course, I don't know what it looks like to you, not literally. But I wondered, and have listened to a few of you sharing your thoughts.

In my contemplation, I found myself stirred by the sense of freedom that this **renewed suite of rooms** affords. What a privilege to be an elder with such a gift of a property. It has a simple beauty and a reinvigorated usefulness. It is full of opportunities for worship and it's a fine resource for the community. Why, even the Member of Parliament is coming to see what we have to offer! How many United Reformed Church elderships would covet such a thoroughly renovated space, at once both well-equipped and ecologically as green as a nineteenth century pile can be made to? It was a rather pleasant moccasin – comfortable and appealing.

Wearing your moccasins, I also thought of the **world in which today's church is set** as an instrument of God's saving grace. It's a world with so much that is awesome and winsome, noble yet even wondrous where it is ordinary. At the same time, it's a world re-cast by Covid 19. Moreover, even as that pandemic persistently claims our attention, it too easily dulls our sensitivity to other scars that are incompatible with the ideals of God's commonwealth. There's the climate emergency, of course, and race and immigration and gender politics. But they, too, can supplant the urgency of things like alleviating poverty, equitable access to social care, equal chances of decent education. Then there's international tension – one day in Gaza, another in Afghanistan; yesterday in Ukraine, tomorrow in Yemen – how effortlessly we've been distracted from the humanitarian crisis there. Eldership of the church as it serves such a world made these moccasins feel as if there was an unfriendly stone in them.

¹ Lathrap, Mary Torrans 1895 *Judge softly* verse 9

Looking at the **church in Western Europe and North America** was sobering, too. Only those who don't *want* to see would deny the decline of church-going Christianity in these islands, together with the drained confidence that evangelical secularisation brings. As the ecclesiastical moccasins lose their comfortable fit – pinching here and too loose there - we find ourselves struggling to discern what the Church's new normal is going to be.

- What's never coming back that we must let go, however much we resist its demise?
- What do we need to do differently if we are to remain as connected to our era as were our forebears to theirs?
- And what new is wanting to emerge, if we give it space and permission to do so?

Will the moccasins ever slip on so effortlessly and comfortably again?

All that's an undeniable part of the backdrop against which we live out our eldership. It isn't the entirety of it – for sure, it's not.

- There's 'the glorious gospel of the blessed God', made known to us in the living and dying and rising of Jesus Christ;
- there's the light that no shadows can smother;
- there's the grace and truth that are revealed when the divine tent is pitched amongst us;
- there's Christ's dying and undying love from which nothing can separate us;
- and at the end, there's our anticipation of the perfect community brought in by the ultimate reign of God – foreshadowed both in the community of the Trinity, and every time we come to this table where, though we are many we are one body because we all partake of the one loaf.

All that, too, is part of the backdrop of our eldership. But nonetheless, the state of the world and of the church can cast a suffocating pall of greyness over us. Maybe the valley of dry bones is just a mite too close to home as an image right now. Is that about ancient history, or might it just be a cartoon of our current experience? And when such thoughts crowd in upon us, that's when eldership can feel a big ask. Maybe some of us gulp. 'Help! Me?', we murmur – perhaps to ourselves because we don't others to hear, but murmur it we do.

So let's pause and slowly, deeply inhale. If we do that on this Feast of Pentecost, we inhale the Holy Spirit – that re-invigorating force which in Ezekiel's vision, put sinew and flesh and skin upon the dry bones, and then even breath, until they lived and stood again. It's quite an image for you and me today, as we're inducted to a term as elders, or promise to support them.

George Herbert's poem, *Easter* is rather different from Mrs Lathrap's musings on moccasins. Aware that the extraordinary events of Easter require his extraordinary response, the seventeenth-century, Welsh-born metaphysical poet, seems to be commanding himself to 'Rise, heart', 'Awake', 'let thy blessed Spirit bear a part'. It's as if he is resolved to put all his trust in the Easter message:

*'can there be any day but this,
though many sunnes to shine endeavour?'*

Confident of the risen Christ, who's 'up by break of day', Herbert welcomes the Spirit and invites it to 'make up our defects'. At ordination to eldership might that be what we are inviting the Spirit to do? Yes, we are offering what we have and are, but the moccasins are making us so aware of what we don't have and aren't. Indeed, that's one way of defining a Christian – it's someone who knows their need of God to make them complete and whole. All the more so a minister or an elder. We are not offering ourselves to God, nor to Downing Place Church, because we are morally perfect, nor because we have every skill or talent required. What we're offering is our availability, for God to

make of us what God would have us be, as the Holy Spirit makes up our defects, transforming the dry bones of our lives with renewed sinew and flesh and breath.

Each of us is different.

- Some of us may need the Spirit to fire us up for mission,
- some to be able to discern what another to re-ignite our faith;
- one to comfort us in our troubled soul;
- another to enable us to love as we have been loved.

In whatever way the moccasins we are wearing enable us to see the world and the church, this service of ordination and induction is essentially an elongated prayer for the Spirit to come down as divine love, to seek our souls and visit them with its 'own ardour glowing'. That's why, we again borrow the church's ancient prayer, this time to its plainsong-like tune from more than a millennium ago. Still we pray, 'Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire.'