

The Mothers' Union Service
St John's, Princes Street, Edinburgh 8th June 2011

I begin with a word of appreciation for the invitation to preach here and for the kind welcome of the Rector of this fine, fine church.

It was a joy beyond measure to hear that the other service taking place simultaneously in the Cathedral along the road was oversubscribed. Let it be said aloud that the Mothers' Union can more than adequately overflow Scotland's largest church!

And then it became my singular privilege to be invited to preach at this overflow service here at St John's. And so here I am and here we all are.

Something significant is happening.

More years ago than I would care to remember I was the curate at Christ Church, Falkirk. The church had a Mothers' Union branch (in actual fact it had two branches) this constituting my first real experience of the MU.

I'd been brought up in a very rural and then quite remote part of North Lincolnshire and though an auntie in Lincoln was a deeply committed MU member, and talked about the MU, nonetheless the organisation was absent from my experience until my days as a curate.

Anyway, not long after ordination with the dog collar still quite shiny, the Edinburgh Diocesan President at the time – Doris Bilton – was to come to speak to a combined meeting of our two branches.

Some parish issue of no memorable note held me up and I arrived at the church hall too late to be there at the start of Doris' talk. So I stood at the door listening to what was going on inside.

It was nothing short of electrifying.

If any of you knew Doris you'll remember her to be one of life's enthusiasts for the Mothers' Union. And so as I stood at that crack in the door and listened I realised very quickly that something very significant was happening inside.

A meeting was being held spellbound. Things were being explained that captivated the audience. There was, quite literally, an encounter with something deeply profound and beyond ourselves.

I wanted to know more and from that moment on have never looked back, such that when I became a rector and when the opportunity arose, I too became a member of the MU.

What I found that night in Falkirk, and what I have never been disappointed at since, was the combination of personal devotion and discipline to God, with the MU's emphasis on active and practical social concern.

I cherish both of these *but I think there could be more* and I'll come back to this in a moment.

In terms of personal discipline and devotion, firstly, I applaud the energy and effort of any organisation that seeks to re-establish, either explicitly or tacitly, the life of personal holiness within each Christian believer and within each Christian community.

It seems to me that if each of us does not seek to deepen our personal faithful relationship with God in the heart of our daily lives then we might as well pack our bags on all we do.

Anglican divines from the 17th century onwards have stressed the vitality and necessity of holy lives committed God as a faithful response to the relationship which God has already established with us.

It is because God has called to us and because we respond that we find, or perhaps I need to say, that we ought to find ourselves inevitably drawn into a life of holy living being enriched day by day as we are lifted to a level of personal holiness. In turn, this means that not only do we yearn to live more fully as God would have us live but that we need others to do so as well.

It is I suggest to you particularly appropriate to be saying this in the period following Easter as the lection in our churches has been tracking a sequence of readings from 1st Peter.

From Chapter 1:15-16, "The One who called you is holy; like him, be holy in all your behaviour, because scripture says, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'." And continuing, "Come and let yourselves be built, as living stones, into a spiritual temple ..."

This life of deepening personal holiness is not something we do for any personal gain, though personal benefit from a life of closer relationship to God does emerge and is not to be underestimated. Rather through it we see that we are impelled to do for one another what Our Lord has already done for us.

This leads me to the thoughts I'd like to share with you in terms of social and wider concern.

My diocese has a twinning arrangement with the Diocese of Mthatha in South Africa's Eastern Cape. Last December I was there with some of our clergy, seeking to foster new congregation to congregation links.

We went to a place called Park, an informal settlement of 15, 20, 25,000 (no one knows the exact population) on the outskirts of Mthatha city.

Anglican churches were first established there in someone's kitchen in 1996 and already there are four outstations from the main already too small parish church.

In one area of this settlement where the local congregation is to establish a new church with rectory, AIDS / HIV clinic and self-help community allotment provision we met a girl of about 13 -14. She lives in a tin shack about the size of a B and Q garden shed. She's on her own, as her mother is dying of AIDS in the hospital. There is no known father.

She is clearly very vulnerable to put it mildly but has been informally adopted by the local MU who see to her well-being and her safety. Rarely a day goes by without me voicing a prayer for her security and a prayer of thanksgiving for the Mothers' Union surrounding her as best they can.

Seeing the Mother's Union in action made me deeply proud of our organisation. They're there at the forefront of spirituality, social concern and evangelism.

This one example could be written large across huge swathes of Africa.

And whilst I am on the subject of social concern let me say how additionally proud I am for the publicity given the MU over the weekend here in Britain.

Sad it is that we live in a society where sexualised exploitation of the young, especially girls, is a commonplace. Targetted advertising and marketing by those leading with an amoralsed profit motive render it necessary for us to say very loudly, 'this far, is already too far'. And we have said it, and must be ready to say it again.

And here, moving on to the third section of this address, is where I feel the MU *could take a further and necessary missionary step*.

Those who have heard me before will know what's coming.

The mainstream churches of Britain have forgotten how to evangelise. We have forgotten, by and large, how to expand our churches. Clearly I rejoice at notable exceptions to this rule, but I think you will recognise what I mean when I say that our churches have become experts at the pain-free management of decline.

And this can't go on. We must now take on the more uncomfortable direction of deliberate and intentional growth. My own diocese knows this because I preach this sermon every time I get into a pulpit, every time we have a meeting in the Diocesan Office and when a congregation invites me to a vestry meeting (that's Scottish for 'PCC') – well, they get the same message too.

As well as deepening personal holiness, as well as active concern and security for society's most vulnerable (and especially our children), I say there must also be explicit missionary and evangelistic endeavour.

Faithful relationships must also find their way into our conversations with those who have yet to see the need to form a faithful relationship with God.

In a society such as our own where the secularised liberal ethos of our democracy is pushing Christianity to the margins of discourse it is all the more important that we articulate clearly and effectively why more and more people should come to know what life in Christ and what the Christian life means.

So I say to you as I say to myself, find ways to enable your home church to grow. Develop a deliberate and intentional missionary and evangelistic arm of the Mothers' Union such that when it says something people take notice and our churches are given a shot in the arm for growth.

In our life with Christ Jesus we have something that is vital for life in all its fullness.

In closing let me sum all this up and paraphrase and add to scripture:

'Let your light so shine before others that they will see your good works, hear your words and, with you, come to glorify your Father in heaven.'

Amen. Bless you all.

†Robert Gillies
Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney
8th June 2011