'As Some of Your Own Poets Have Said . . .'

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[The following is the text of the sermon delivered by Dr (now Professor) Donald Meek at a church service in Greyfriars Tolbooth and Highland Kirk to mark the fortieth anniversary of the School of Scottish Studies in 1991. Because of a number of requests to see it in print, it is included in this volume of *Scottish Studies*.]

We meet this morning to commemorate, and even to celebrate, the fortieth birthday of the School of Scottish Studies. It is often said that life begins at forty, and so, if I am not mistaken, we not only commemorate and celebrate—we also anticipate, and look forward to many more years of the School's activities as an integral, but distinctive, part of the University of Edinburgh.

During these forty years, the School of Scottish Studies has established itself in the Scottish consciousness as a major cultural institution. Its collectors have been active throughout Scotland, from Shetland to Galloway, from Tiree to Arbroath, from Lewis to the Borders—active in the collection of the traditions of the Scottish people in several languages—Scots itself, English, Gaelic and other tongues. Its transcribers have spent hours transferring the spoken word to the written record. Its scholars have shared their insights into the nature of the tradition, its many varied forms and characteristics. The result has been that much that would have been lost for ever has been preserved, and the status of Scottish tradition has been enhanced.

It may appear to some a little incongruous that, although the School of Scottish Studies is not a religious institution, we should commemorate its achievements as we do today, in a religious context. It was not established to record specifically religious material, although it has certainly done that, in its tapes of hymns and Psalms and sermons; it has not sought any accommodation with any church; and its staff probably represent many shades of opinion in these matters. Nevertheless, we are gathered here today, as the School itself would wish, to give thanks to God for those forty years of activity.

It is, in my view, appropriate that we should do so. Whatever our opinion, we will, I trust, accept that there are times when sacred and secular can come together to their mutual advantage, and when both can be strengthened in the process. It is one of the sadder aspects of modern life that we tend to compartmentalise our

activities, and, in so doing, separate sacred and secular. We can even construct walls between them, so high that few can climb from one compartment into the other. We who would make an open profession of religion must confess that we have been the builders of such walls, and that we have all too often policed them with vigour.

When we go back to the Scriptures with an open mind, we find some surprising interaction of sacred and secular at various levels. In Acts chapter 17, the Apostle Paul is in that great city of Greek culture, Athens. Here we see the Hebrew of Hebrews, the once-proud teacher of the Jewish law but now the zealous advocate of the resurrected Lord Jesus, crossing a cultural boundary into the philosophy and life of another people. His tactics and approach have much to tell us about his views on the relationship between sacred and secular culture. If we cast the Apostle in our own mould, we may come out with several interpretations, each as different from the other as we ourselves are. But I think that if we are faithful to the New Testament narrative, rather than to our own preconceptions, we will find that the Apostle is showing us very clearly that secular tradition has its own place in the purposes of God, and that it can be used to strengthen the sacred message that we would wish to transmit to others. In short, I would like to suggest to you that true, New Testament Christianity is not the enemy of the secular tradition, nor does it fail to accommodate it and appreciate it where appropriate.

I focus my attention on the remarkable phrase, used by the Apostle, 'As some of your own poets have said'. As that phrase has reverberated through my mind in the last couple of weeks, I have been very much aware that we in Scotland have a rich heritage of poetry, as well as prose, in our several languages. We have heard the verse read in Gaelic; in Scots it reads, 'een as some o your ain poets has said'. How appropriate, therefore, to anchor our thoughts in this phrase.

First, let us note that the Apostle was not, in fact, referring to any known Christian poets among the Greeks. He was here drawing on pagan, non-Christian tradition. The first quotation comes from the fourth line of a poem attributed to Epimenedes the Cretan ('For in thee we live and move and have our being') and the second from the Cilician poet, Aratus ('For we are also his offspring'). Both poems had to do with Zeus, perceived as the Supreme Being of Stoic philosophy rather than the head of the Greek pantheon. This revelation may well surprise us, but, if it does, it will demonstrate only how unaccommodating we are in our interpretation of the New Testament. Paul the Apostle would readily confess that he was 'debtor both to the Jews and to the Greeks', and his debts to both cultures were extensive.

Let us not lose the significance of the Apostle's use of Greek poetry. We can conclude that he is aware of the rhetorical force of using quotations which would be meaningful to his audience, and which would reinforce his own arguments that there is an 'unknown God' who can be known. But perhaps—and this is more significant—Paul is indicating that these pagan poets, in trying to establish the

attributes of Zeus as Supreme Being, have glimpsed into two major aspects of God. The God who was unknown to the Athenians was not necessarily unknown, or at least totally unknown, to their Greek poets. What aspects of God had they perceived? They had perceived His role as the upholder of life—'In him we live and move and have our being'—and as the Father of humanity—'For we are his offspring'. These are the perceptions by which the Apostle is able to find common ground with the Athenians, and to press forward his argument about the Nature of God and the way in which He should be worshipped.

The Apostle's message to the Athenian philosophers is thus one which acknowledges their own rich tradition of poetry and thought. It does not belittle their culture. Paul does not engage in a bout of iconoclasm, destroying their idols by physical force or verbal abuse. Rather, he sees that deep in the hearts and aspirations of those people is a religious motivation. They are very religious. Religious in their own way, of course. They are devout, sincere people, but they have not captured the real fullness of the God who is the creator of the ends of the earth, 'who fainteth not, neither is weary'. Nevertheless, they are on the road to identifying the 'unknown god'—they are searching for him, and in the course of that search their poets have produced insights that are worth preserving and re-using.

Here we encounter a splendid principle of missionary endeavour in the cross-cultural context. It is one of respect for existing structures and existing views; it recognises what is good and re-uses it as a vehicle for portraying the Christian God. In the history of the British Isles, there have been times when missionaries used precisely this principle; they recognised that, even if the Fall had destroyed some of the image of God in His creation, yet glimpses of that image remained and it was possible for God to break through to the minds of men and women who hardly knew Him, but were nevertheless striving to know Him. Indeed, some of our own poets from the period of the early Irish Church operated along these lines, and produced hymns in praise of God which were filled with the images and concepts of the pre-Christian heroic period. They knew that these would resonate and make connections with a web of references from an earlier attempt to find a supreme being.

Of course, down through the ages there have been other views of non-Christian heritage, which have come into force as strong reactions against idolatry and secular paganism. All too often the iconoclasts have made a powerful impact, and have turned the Christian faith into a grim programme for the destruction of pre-existing culture. It is hardly surprising that people find this off-putting, and that the last thing they want to do is to find God, the true God. Seen in this context, the true God is the avowed enemy of their indigenous culture, and the words of His son, Jesus, may sound hollow—'I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly'. When Jesus came to earth, he came to show that God

could inhabit the most utterly human and distinctive aspect of human culture—the human body, which had been occupied by pagans and non-pagans, by rich and poor, by slave and free, by moral and immoral, by good and bad, across the centuries. When the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, what an investment that was in human culture!

Christian faith, in its real glory and beauty, is not the end of culture, but the beginning of a true appreciation of it. It is the beginning of a new discrimination, a new awareness. Paul knew well that the Athenians were already a discriminating and aware people; they spent their time discussing and debating, and he wanted that debate to go on, until their views were enlarged, and they could see the majesty and glory of the One True God. 'As some of your own poets have said'—ah, that was the way to lay the foundation of the argument, but he went on to show them more on that basis, and to explain the plan of God for the world.

What can we say of Paul that is relevant to ourselves? We can say that here was the Apostle of Christ, but here also the Apostle of the democratic intellect, the teacher who wanted to be relevant to the cultural circumstance. He knew that poetry was one of the great gifts of the Creator, and that the Creator could use it to His glory. It could be a step along the way towards an understanding of the ultimate revelation of God in Christ. Here we see the Christian Apostle open-mindedly taking a step into the pre-Christian world of his Athenian hearers. The question is whether we are as open-minded as he was, but prepared to move in the other direction, as we view the Christian message before us. Are we prepared to entertain even the possibility that God can be known to us?

Paul's readiness to employ the insights of the pagan poets of Greek culture is by no means an isolated example of the manner in which true New Testament Christianity harnessed and enriched the culture of its own day. Briefly, and in conclusion, I would point you to the example of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. As His earliest disciples, He chose some of the fishermen of Galilee, men who would have been filled with the tales and traditions of the fishing community; and as He communicated His messages about the immanence of the Kingdom of God, did He not employ parables and stories which were surely already part of the lore of the people? The Incarnation was intended not to impoverish, but to enrich, the whole of human culture.

Let us then pause this morning as we reflect on the heritage that we have received from those who have gone, that heritage which includes the riches of tales and poetry, of music and song—that heritage which has been transmitted by the ordinary men and women of past days. Is it not consistent with the Christian ethic to preserve it and to cherish it for the next generation, to let it breathe through the blanket of death-dealing snow which is the persistent enemy of our cultural distinctiveness? And is it not valid to see within some parts of it the strivings of the hearts of our own people for a meaningful encounter with God? We have had many

poets in Scotland who have been overtly and unashamedly Christian too—our Dugald Buchanans and our Peter Grants and our Horatius Bonars. But there have been other poets also who have made no overtly Christian profession, but who have nevertheless glimpsed the reality of God in the world around them.

I close therefore by reading a poem by one of our own poets—a poet who composed in Gaelic, Scots and English, and who was no less familiar with Arabic and Italian and French and German and with the Scandinavian languages. That poet is the late George Campbell Hay. In this poem, Hay glimpsed the glory of God in creation as he saw a squall coming in from the west, and blotting out temporarily the rocky grandeur of the island of Arran:

THE BATTLEMENTS

Wondrous clouds are heaped aloft,
with a dark flush and a fierce swelling;
strong turrets, towers full of pride,
threatening banners, mist and rage.

Fearful darkness creeps before them,
and down out of them the lightning flashes;
they trail after them the grey rain
like a blinding curtain across the sea.

Yonder are waves and land, their colour lost,
blotted out by the torrent from the skies,
and gapped Arran gone under a cloak—
it is a terrible glory of the glories of God.

As one of our own poets has said, 'a terrible glory of the glories of God'. Have we lifted up our eyes to see as he saw?

Amen.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
The translation of 'Na Baidealan' (The Battlements) quoted above is taken from D. MacAulay, ed, *Nua-Bhàrdachd Ghàidhlig: Modern Scottish Gaelic Poems*, Edinburgh 1974, 118-120.