

Sermon on the 200th anniversary of the death of Bishop George Hay

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We gather 200 years to the very day since George Hay, Vicar Apostolic of the Lowland District fell asleep in the Lord at Aquhorties.

We come to recall his life and contribution to the Church in Scotland, and to thank God for this enormously important figure, whose life was as varied as it was fruitful.

The words of the readings we have just heard provide a key to our celebration and can surely be applied to this giant of the revival of the Faith in our homeland ... His life of adventure and hardship echoed that of St Paul, whose words could have been written by or for him ...

“Remember the Good News that I carry, Jesus Christ risen from the dead, sprung from the race of David; it is on account of this that I have my own hardships to bear, even to being chained like a criminal ...

“I bear it all for the sake of those who are chosen so that in the end they may have salvation that in Christ Jesus and the eternal glory that comes with it.”

Hay of course knew exactly what it was like to be “chained like a criminal” on account of his beliefs. He was imprisoned both in Edinburgh and London after his medical service with the Jacobite armies of Bonnie Prince Charlie and of his clear sympathies for the Stuart cause.

Who can say, whether it was that encounter with the faith of so many Jacobite soldiers which led to his own conversion, the year after his release from prison, from Episcopalianism to Catholicism, but history records his being received into the Catholic Church just a few days before Christmas 1748.

What is very probable is that he owed his vocation to the priesthood to his encounters with the famous Bishop Richard Challoner whom he met in 1750 in London. Within a year he had enrolled in the Pontifical Scots College in Rome to study for the priesthood and his life's course had been definitively set.

And what a Rome it must have been in the mid 18th century to the young convert highland student...

How extraordinary its sights and customs, how imposing its buildings and rituals, how inspiring its panting heart and its soil drenched in the blood of the martyrs.

We can only imagine the impact of that experience on the young Hay – eight years spent at the court of Pope Benedict XIV ... It was a time of high drama. The suppression of the Jesuits was being discussed in the embassies of Rome, while in the streets of the eternal city, a famous preacher was Saint Leonard of Port Maurice, the apostle of the Via Crucis, who famously set up 14 stations of the Cross inside the ruins of the Colosseum.

Some of the great baroque churches we admire today had recently been completed; it was a city that was the magnet of the Grand Tour, its cityscape and surrounding *campagna* being the inspiration for artists of the day.

Giovanni Battista Piranesi would have been a regular sight in the streets, completing his "*vedute*" of the Eternal City which were to make his name.

Hay would have paused frequently, on his way to the Roman College, at the Palazzo Muti, where the Old Pretender, James III, held court, and seen in their carriages Charles Edward Stuart – Bonnie Prince Charlie – and his brother Henry Benedict, the Cardinal Duke of York.

Fortified, formed and filled with faith, George Hay returned to Scotland in April 1759 – what a contrast of life experience was to follow as he served as missionary at Preshome for the next eight years, though it has to be said that

that area was rather elegant at the time and not some kind of highland wilderness.

But his talents were not forgotten in Rome and in 1769 he was consecrated bishop in secret at Scalan, having been appointed titular bishop of Daulia and coadjutor Vicar Apostolic of the Lowland District, a title to which he succeeded in 1778.

I think we can safely say that George Hay was a man inspired, indeed on fire with apostolic zeal.

He would surely have made his own those words of today's Gospel: "I want those you have given me to be with me where I am ...I have made your name known to them and will continue to make it known so that the love with which you loved me may be in them."

It was that zeal to spread the faith that led him to transfer the centre of the Church in Scotland away from the Highlands, to Aberdeen and then to Edinburgh. His foresight was legendary, and to this day the Church in Scotland is benefitting from his shrewd financial decisions.

We still can admire his tiny, neat handwriting in our archives with which he recorded with extreme administrative rigour his decisions and counsels for the effective and productive running of the Church in Scotland in that second half of the 18th century.

His writings are numerous – too numerous to mention. But we cannot omit to recall some of the major works which helped shape Catholicism in this land of ours. I am thinking of the first Gaelic catechism published for Edinburgh Highland Catholics in 1781; his five volume Rheims version of the Bible which was an enormous boon to the Church of his time and his much loved "Short Abridgement of Christian Doctrine".

It is significant that two of his works were reprinted in centenary editions – "The Sincere Christian" and "Bishop Hay on the Priesthood", both of which

were republished 100 years ago. I wonder whether we should dip into his archive once more to mark this 200th anniversary?

Hay was a polemicist (he would give some of our current Bishops a run for their money in terms of his forays into the public debate!); he was an able administrator; he was a scholar, but first and foremost he was a pastor of souls.

As we recall him today we give thanks to God for the survival and revival of the faith in Scotland, and for the gift of George Hay, who was so much a part of that story.

Hay is buried in St Ninian's Churchyard, Fetternear in Aberdeenshire. A quirk of historical fate has meant that his grave is unmarked and no memorial marks the resting place of one of Scotland's greatest Vicars Apostolic.

But no matter, the true memorial of his life has been the continued expansion and flourishing of the old faith in his beloved Scotland, and as we gather here today in his memory, we do well to thank God for all that he achieved and to sing a *Te Deum* after our *De Profundis*.