



Reflection for the Scottish Parliament December 2002

Members of the Scottish Parliament and Officials:

I am grateful for the invitation to come here today to offer some reflections as we prepare for the Christmas recess. It is natural that my focus should be on Christ since it is his birthday that gives the season its name and its cause for rejoicing.

In the Christian calendar, the present season is called Advent – a time for looking forward to Christmas. I take as my text for our reflections a passage from the prophet Isaiah, from a book sacred to the great monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It sketches out the figure of the perfect prince – a man of wisdom, dispenser of justice, and a defender of the poor. You are the princes of the people and it is therefore good to reflect upon what Isaiah describes:

*A shoot springs from the stock of Jesse
A scion thrusts from his roots:
On him the spirit of the Lord rests,
a spirit of wisdom and insight,
a spirit of counsel and power
a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
He does not judge by appearances,
He gives no verdict on hearsay,
but judges the wretched with integrity,
and with equity gives a verdict for the poor of the land.*

For the Jew this prince is expected; for the Christian he has come; for the Muslim he is a prophet. We see history turning on the shaft of his birth.

In poetic terms Isaiah describes a world at peace, the fruits of justice:

*The wolf lives with the lamb,
The panther lies down with a kid,
calf and lion cub feed together
with a little boy to lead them.
The infant plays over the cobra's hold:
into the viper's lair
the young child puts his hand.
They do no hurt, no harm,
on all my holy mountain.*

It is this peace, a world free from harm, that we and all men and women of goodwill desire.

While the use of this passage in our liturgy helps to focus our attention on the Christ child, the words of Isaiah must also resonate here where you have most admirably addressed the needs of the child and expressed in a practical manner your concern for children's safety. At the same time I also think they may sound a warning bell for Parliament has to face the facts that despite a worrying increase in teenage pregnancies, the Scottish birth rate is insufficient to renew the population. Does this mean that the child is not so central to our future hopes as it once was and that our attention is more focussed on disposable commodities? Our society is certainly marked by such contradictions as an ever greater medical commitment to helping the infertile whilst maintaining wide provision for contraception and abortion. The account shows a deficit. There is certainly an unreadiness to welcome the unexpected child.

Relative to Christmas this poses the question whether the foretold but unexpected child of Mary would have been at as great a risk today as he was from Herod – a sobering thought.

"Hope", said the great poet theologian, Peguy, "is the little sister of faith and charity". I see your fidelity to a social vision and your concern for the economically and culturally deprived as corresponding in some way to these supernatural virtues of faith and charity, but you also need hope both in its normal and in its transcendent form. Hope is the leader's star, making him, in Isaiah's words, "a signal to the peoples".

With the wise men may you recognise this star over the infant's cradle this Christmas.

Allow me to draw from the Old Testament this blessing on you and on your work:

*May the Lord bless you and keep you;
May the Lord let his face shine upon you and
be gracious to you;
May the Lord look upon you with kindness and give you
His peace.
A very happy Christmas to you all.*