**LAY READERS CONFERENCE 190512**

**The Word in the World**

**‘They were yours and you gave them to me and they have kept my word’**

**Jesus’ words are a remarkable series of statements – about giving, about unity, about prayer. They bind us as the disciples to him and through him to the Father. And he explores the relationship between what is in the world and what is with God.**

**You have been exploring the theme ‘the Word in the World’ – a good theme for a Lay Reader Conference. We who have ‘kept your word’ – or tried to – are those who are caught in the tension between being ‘out of the world’ and ‘in the world’. We are rooted in the world. Our feet are firmly on the ground. And that surely is a good thing for mission. No point, as they say, being so heavenly minded that we are no earthly use. But we are also out of the world – connected in prayer and love to Jesus and through him to the Father. And what we offer to people in mission arises out of that connectedness.**

**Bishops and Lay Readers have something in common and I hope you will be generous enough to allow me to have something in common with you. We both are supposed to live on the intersection – or across the boundary – between church and world. You do that because you are not clergy and I think you should value and prize that status – because at its best it gives you a rootedness and a directness which comes from not being religious professionals. I do the same in a slightly different way. My week included a conversation about faith and society with the First Minister. It also included a deep conversation about faith with a young man of Pakistani Moslem origin in the paper shop on the Dundeld Road in Perth. My blog talked, among other things, about a visit this week to the Tate Modern Gallery in London and the extraordinary skull covered in diamonds which is part of a reflection on life and death by the artist Damien Hirst. And that enabled me to ask myself and my readers whether baptism might not be a better way of reflecting on death and life.**

**And since these words of Jesus are often used as part of our focus on the unity of the church, let me share with you an interesting conversation I had with the General Sec of the Baptist Union in Scotland – who said that he had just told their lay preachers ‘not to let their preaching come in the way of their primary task in mission’ Which sounds rather like St Francis who said, ‘Preach the Gospel. Use words if you must.’**

**Let me go back to where I began – with the Word in the World and the disciples who ‘kept your word.’ It’s the tension between being ‘out of the world’ and ‘in the world’**

**I believe that we are at our most boring and irrelevant when we talk about our own stuff in our own language – when we are thinking about the church, its membership and its preoccupations. Far better to be thinking in discipleship mode – to attempt to speak with and to people with an integrity, a clarity and an authority which comes because we are attempting to make eternal truth accessible. Or to put it another way – religious conversation is usually boring; spiritual conversation is enlivening and transformative. And here’s another way of looking at the contrast. The young man in the paper shop asked me whether I was Catholic – and I tried to talk about Jesus. I recently took part in an intranet discussion with teenagers in schools across Scotland with faith group leaders – not just Christians. The Sikhs, Buddists and the rest aren’t good at talking about religion but they proved to be extraordinarily good at talking about God.**

**And one more thing. Jesus words are all about giving and about prayer. He blesses us his people. He reminds us that we belong to him in a particular way.** Whenever we are offered a blessing in the Bible, we might be tempted to run and hide - because a blessing never comes without a God-sized mission. And God-sized missions never come without a cost.

And that reminds us finally of the vocational journey which we all on – the awareness of the present of Christ in our lives stirs a response in us. In you it has stirred the response to offer service to the church and to the world. On behalf of our church I thank you for that and pray that God will richly bless the ministry which you exercise in his name.