Glenalmond Confirmation 060516

At the beginning of this Service, Father Giles described preparation for Confirmation. It’s exploring and testing – addressing questions to which there are answers and some to which there are not. Much of the religious or spiritual experience of people is about searching and exploring – being on a journey to find a meaningful faith.

On Wednesday this week I went with the Religious Leaders of Scotland – that’s what the group is called – to the Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre. It’s an extraordinary place – 110 miles due south of here and it takes 2.40 to cover that distance. And suddenly in the middle of Eskdalemuir, you could to a little bit of Tibet.

Well not so little. A community and a temple – a conference centre, a library, a fully-equipped multimedia studio. All built to the very highest standards and obviously intended to last another 4000 years. I sat in the Temple with my friend John Chalmers, former Moderator of the Church of Scotland. We listened to the chanting and the banging of the gong and wondered about the nature of worship in all its diversity – of which more in a moment.

The people I was with were the leaders of the various strands of Islam, the Jewish Commuity, Sikhs, Bah’ai, Friends or Quakers, Buddhism and Christian. They wear exotic clothes of which I am deeply envious. There has been a change. These are younger leaders, entirely at home in, part of and deeply committed to this society - very articulate and thoughtful. We sat around the table and talked of many things – the radicalisation of young men within the Moslem tradition and I reminded them that the same radicalisation happened in the Christian tradition within my own community in Northern Ireland. And we explored the complex question of anti-Semitism which has been in the news this week.

But actors say you should never work with children or animals. So in came a class of children from Lincluden Primary School. They had questions for us and they wanted answers. The one directed to me was ‘How do people worship and why do they worship?’ People like me always say ‘That’s a really interesting question’ – which is a way of buying time. It’s a question which we might ask today in this Confirmation Service. So what did I say?

I said that people worship for many reasons – because they are seeking a deeper meaning to life and a way towards answers to ultimate questions which seem not to have answers – why suffering? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why am I here and what am I here for? They worship because they seek spiritual experience – and experience of the presence of the living God. And if they do not worship in that way – they may still worship but they will worship all sorts of things. Some will be very good things but some less so. I gave myself about deux points for that.

The children seemed to me to be in the right area – and I am sure that Father Giles will have explored many of these questions in the Confirmation Preparation – good questions like, ‘What is all this faith stuff for? Does faith enhance life or diminish it? Is this just about right and wrong or is there more? Does God exist and if so what is he doing?’

In this Confirmation Service you are affirming your commitment to a way of faith – we often call that discipleship. You are affirming a belief in the reality of God who created us – and that he seeks to continue to shape our lives according to his will and purpose – a purpose which is always and only for our good. And if the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy , peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control, you are saying that you hope to use all the talents and opportunities you have been given – but real success is often success in relationships in family, workplace and community. I think also you are saying that you will follow a spiritual journey, seeking the reality of God in the world, in yourself and in others. It’s that search which leads people to Samye Ling. But it’s here too in this beautiful building raised to the glory of God, in this community which values faith at its heart, in your teaching and learning.

Our prayer for all of you today is that your lives will be shaped in the worship of God, through the movement of the spirit, through what you receive from one another. And that you will lead lives of real value – of generosity, love and sacrifice – which honour your creator.