

PRESENTING AS MINISTRY

Since we're holding this Precentors' Conference in Edinburgh, I'd like to begin with a local story. You might even like to go and see what I'm going to refer to before leaving Edinburgh today! Go to Waterloo Place, to that part where the pedestrian lane winds up to Calton Hill, then at the entrance to the lane, look at the wall on the right-hand side, and you will see, partly obscured by vegetation, a bronze plaque in honour of three men: **John Templeton/ John Wilson & David Kennedy**. Apart from their names, there is no indication of the reason why they were honoured, and passers-by today must wonder, if they see the partially hidden plaque at all, that is, "*For what were these men famous?*". The answer is, **singing**. All three were Edinburgh precentors, and in Scotland they were "The Three Tenors" of their day, the first half of the 19th century. They came on the scene at a time when precenting was regarded as a fine art, during a period when church praise was thought of as the domain of great musicians. **Templeton** and **Wilson** eventually forsook precenting for the stage, becoming very successful as operatic tenors, and **Kennedy** became a popular singer of Scottish songs on both sides of the Atlantic. On one occasion when **Templeton** returned to Edinburgh to sing in opera, he called on his old minister, Dr Brown of Broughton Place, to be told by him, "You must give us a day at the desk, John", and Templeton agreed. Millar Patrick tells us that the rumour that he was to present brought a great throng to church. The singing had not proceeded far, when *the congregation ceased to take part*. As Dr Patrick says, "they were listening to the golden voice which was *ostensibly* leading them. When the psalm-portion was ended, Dr Brown leant over the pulpit desk, and said, 'Just go on, John, just go on'. How long John went on the story does not tell us."

One thing we do know for sure is that, after their day, all three of these men of the golden voices passed into obscurity, even within the Church. They won their fame as vocalists; but none of them was in any sense a true leader of the praise of God, at a time when there was a crying need for leadership in congregational singing. And that is what I have chosen as the keynote of our Conference today: "***Presenting as Ministry***".

Presenting as Ministry? The very idea sounds weird. After all, in Scottish Presbyterianism, we have the minister, and he's the man in charge of the preaching, the praying, and indeed, the conduct of the service as a whole. And then we have the precentor, who leads the singing – but by tradition he didn't even have to be a member of the congregation. There was a time when one might have seen an advert in "the Scotsman" – "*Precentor sought by such-and-such a church - remuneration so much per annum. Please apply to....*".

But, one has to ask, from a biblical perspective, what is a 'minister' anyway? Minister comes from the Greek word "leitourgos", meaning "one who gives public service". It eventually became attached to the idea of "the Christian minister of the Word", the person who performs the main biblical teaching and preaching in a congregation. But, bearing in mind that "leitourgia" comes down to us as "liturgy", there are not one, but two, ministers of the Word in a service of worship – the "minister of the Word preached", and the "minister of the Word sung", and I'd like us to carry that comparison for the rest of our conference, and beyond.

But let's stop at this point, and ask the question, "What else might precenting be, if not ministry?" Well, perhaps it could be "**Precenting as duty**". Sometimes a person precent because they feel it's expected of them. They're letting the side down if they don't. Not a bad motive. It's been said of prayer also, better to pray out of a sense of duty, than not to pray at all. But, how does that sit in comparison with the preaching ministry? If your pastor said at his induction, "Well, I'm not sure if I should be here at all. I'd rather not, if somebody else could be found. But I feel it's my duty to do it." That approach certainly wouldn't go down well for the preaching ministry.

Then there's "**Precenting out of necessity**". A person may say, "Well, there's nobody else to do it, so it might as well be me". Again, if a preacher were to say, "There's nobody else coming to you, so you'll have to put up with me", it would not commend him to the people as a loving pastor.

Then there's "**Precenting as tradition**". Perhaps someone has been holding forth at the precentor's desk for the past 30 years, and the only reason they're still doing it is, because they're in the habit of doing it. It's part of their life's routine, and that's why they wouldn't consider taking a back seat. Once again, if the main reason the preaching minister enters the pulpit this Sunday is because he's done that for the last 1500 Sundays, then that congregation would be in trouble!

Then there's "**Precenting as self-aggrandisement**". Even if we said that John Templeton, John Wilson and David Kennedy did not seek to exalt themselves through precenting, it is true that they were exalted by others. And, sadly, it has to be said, that there have been those who have used the position of the preaching ministry to promote their own egos. But, I'm sure there's no doubt in our minds that, in both preaching and precenting, it's simply not appropriate.

When a minister takes his vows at his ordination and induction, he swears that the things which chiefly induced him to become a minister are "*zeal for Christ and a passion for souls*". I would contend that the same should be true of "the ministers of the Word of God sung". It may well be that a precentor finds himself starting off in the position of leading God's people in song through a sense of duty, necessity or tradition, but he doesn't have to remain in that mode. If he has the God-given ability to hold a tune and lead in it, then he should ask the Lord, in His Providence, what He wants him to learn through this, and even to *become* through this – a minister of the grace of God in the manner in which he leads God's people in His praises. This is a high responsibility, and I would even venture to say, a calling, a ministry to be fulfilled. There is obviously a place for someone occasionally helping out at the precentor's desk to fill in, just as we have so-called lay preachers who give supply (and much appreciated it is too). But when a person is faced with the opportunity to lead God's people in praise with regularity, then he or she is faced with the big question, "Why am I doing this?"

From a technical point of view, there are three things, (three 'P's) that should be taken very seriously by every precentor, who should do his best to get them right. The first two are the **Pitch** and the **Pace**. The 3rd 'P' is the **Passion** – the feelings that should be expressed through a particular psalm. We have in our hands not only the Word of God, but very human songs, expressing the highest and the lowest states of human experience. And if we just sing every psalm or song the same, with no inflection or variation in our voice, then we are committing a travesty, and furthermore, we cease to minister to the people of God. Just as the when the preacher who preaches in Psalm 22 should express the poignancy and pain of the sufferings of Jesus, the precentor should do the same in the presenting of it. The precentor is not just a starter, but a leader at every point of the psalm. We are to lead the people through the psalm, reflecting the emotional & spiritual journey. As we sing v.4 of Ps. 23 (“Yea, though I walk in death’s dark vale...”) in sombre, quiet tones, so we should be ready to lead the people joyously in the last verse (“Goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me...”). Furthermore, sometimes the change of gear in a psalm, from a position of sorrow and hopelessness, such as in Ps.13 (“...or I will sleep the sleep of those who die...”), can best be shown by a change of key upwards in the last stanza – remember to alert the people to this beforehand! - (“But still I trust Your constant love; You save and set me free...”) This is more than just about musical dynamics – this is **ministry**: helping the people to praise their God from their hearts, as well as with their voices, neither of which Messrs Templeton, Wilson or Kennedy did very well, for all their vocal agility.

In conclusion, can I just leave you with a list of practical things which will help the precentor to see him (or her) self more as a minister of the praise of God, and not just some ecclesiastical functionary:

- 1. Steep yourself in the Praise materials.** As a section of Scripture, the Book of Psalms should be your closest friend. Get to know the teaching of the Psalms intimately, so that when you sing them, you are able to understand the psalmist’s experience, and the causes of his joy or pain. *This* is the way to add correct Passion to correct Pitch and Pace.
- 2. Encourage the Formation of a Praise Committee in your Congregation.** To experience growth and development in a significant aspect of congregational life, such

as the praise, there needs to be a meeting of minds. The advantages of having a much more understandable, and more accurately translated, contemporary psalter, with a greater variety of tunes in interesting metres, will not be fully experienced unless their introduction is driven forward by a group of like-minded people. Do not expect the minister of the Word to be the only one, or even the main one, to lead the way in the praise. That may not be his gift..

3. **Ask your Minister if he would be willing to receive suggestions re. the psalms & tunes to be sung.** The minister of the Word has by wont and custom become the chooser of the praise in our congregations, but that is not the way it has to be. If he is prepared to share with the precentor the theme of his sermon in good time, and if the precentor is well acquainted with the contours of the Book of Psalms, then there is no reason why he should not be able to make constructive suggestions about suitable psalms to accompany that theme. That way, praise development re. new psalms & tunes can be coordinated more effectively by the precentor as well. This is the system used at Free St Columba's, always with the proviso that the minister is at liberty to change any of the psalms chosen, or the order of those psalms, since he sees the 'big picture' of what is appropriate for the service of worship.

4. **Commit everything you do to the grace of God.** Remember that God's Spirit wants to use your ministry to touch the lives of others. Some people are touched as they listen to the Word of God preached, others by the Word sung. The Lord can use you if you are willing to be used by Him.

I'd like to finish by referring to a beautiful Christian called Frances Ridley Havergal, who lived in the mid 19th century. Frances was a very accomplished musician and singer. She could have made a living as an operatic singer, like Messrs. Templeton & Co., but she forebore because of a burden for souls. She wrote a hymn which she called her 'Consecration Hymn', which reflects her view of how the Lord wanted her to use her voice: **"Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King; take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee."**

May that be the prayer of every precentor, as we seek to fulfil our ministry as leaders of the praise of God.

* * * * *