

Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a disgrace to any people. Proverbs 14.34.

Today we are joined by members of the St Andrew's Society and honoured by the presence of the Mayor and Mayoress of Harrogate as we celebrate the St Andrew, the patron Saint of Scotland. Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, is important in the gospel accounts, for, according to St John's gospel, he was the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Andrew was the first to be called by our Lord, and he was also the first missionary, because he brought his brother Peter to Jesus. I am still convinced that the best evangelism is personal. It's all very well strangers knocking on doors to tell others about Jesus, but it is far more effective when someone you already know, trust and respect shares the faith with you. When children see their parents taking Jesus seriously, it has a powerful effect. When a friend you look up to asks you if you want come to church with him, you might just take him up on it, because it's him. Ask your neighbour if they fancy coming to church with you next Sunday. They trust you and know you, and your asking them may just be the chance they've been waiting for. After all, it's a pretty daunting thing to walk into a strange church on your own. Andrew's greatness lay in the fact that the first thing he did when he found Jesus was to tell his brother. Let's turn to p1064, to *John* 1.40-42a...

Andrew never got the press that his brother Simon Peter got, but he was still an important and impressive person. Ever since at least the 10th century Scotland has adopted St Andrew as its patron saint. The famous 1320 Declaration of Arbroath

which proclaimed Scotland's independence from England cited St Andrew as the one who converted Scotland to Christianity.

Ancient tradition claimed that Andrew also preached along the Black Sea, and that is very probably why he is the patron saint of Ukraine, Russia and Romania, as well as Greece and Prussia. Certainly St Andrew's Day which is 30 November has become the national day of Scotland. The Scottish saltire of the diagonal cross tells of the manner of Andrew's martyrdom for the faith, for he considered himself unworthy of being executed on an upright cross like Jesus, so he requested that the Cross be placed on the diagonal.

It all seems like a different world now, doesn't it? The Scottish people clearly wanted to commit themselves all those years ago to the protection and patronage of this most impressive disciple of Christ. They were inspired by his Christian example and placed their national destiny in his hands. How things have changed today! Would we even think these days that our nation had a 'national destiny'? It seems to me that we British should permanently be on a guilt trip about anything we have done in history. The empire was an unmitigated criminal disaster and we should keep spending our time apologising to the world for all the awful things we British have done to the world.

We have become so secularised that our political leaders would certainly not think about choosing a patron saint, because, do you know what? it might *offend* someone. And anyway, we've grown out of all that superstitious claptrap.

But here's a funny thing. The 20th century has been for

Britain a story of continuous decline, hasn't it? The 20th century has also been the century when we abandoned God big-time! Even up to the 1920s huge churches were being built. Most of the churches in Harrogate were built in the last 150 years. But then it just fell apart. Do you remember being taught scripture in school? Not anymore. It's banned. It might offend. Now you can be sacked from your job if you wear a crucifix - in a so-called Christian country where the Queen is Supreme Governor of the Church of England, established by law, and where at the last Census 73% said that they were Christians. What's going on here? Why do Christians feel like a persecuted minority in a country where the vast majority say they are Christians, even if they don't actually go to church?

So the 20thC has seen on the one hand the steady decline of our once great nation and on the other the large-scale abandonment of God. Are these two processes connected? In the National Portrait Gallery is a once-famous painting by Thomas Jones Barker entitled *The Secret of England's Greatness (Queen Victoria presenting a Bible in the Audience Hall at Windsor)*. The so-called 'secret of England's greatness' was of course the Bible; the fact that we actually *believed* something, and had some inner spiritual substance.

So what do we believe today? See to yourself? Make sure you get your human rights? Make sure you don't get caught? Greed is good? It doesn't amount to very much, does it? No wonder our society is crumbling, and more and more are escaping into alcohol and drugs and porn. You see, there's nothing at the centre, is there?

Thought small, Scotland was once a mighty nation. Its people went to the furthest parts of the planet. It produced great philosophers like David Hume, writers like Robert Burns, RL Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, and one of the greatest economists of all time, Adam Smith. I could go on with inventors and engineers. Scotland was overflowing with theologians and biblical scholars, and it gave the world the metrical psalms, like 'The Lord's my Shepherd'. It was a Scottish King, James VI who gave us the King James Version of the Bible whose 400th anniversary we celebrate today. But even then, we very nearly were refused by the library to have an exhibition in Harrogate library lest it *offend* others, until wiser and more courageous heads prevailed.

Did you see Ian Hislop's TV programme last week, *When Bankers were Good*? He described how in the 19thC there was a huge banking crash. Some bankers were so ashamed that they committed suicide. Nowadays the bankers who failed us just collect their bonuses and 'move on'. How can a nation ever be great when those are our values? Where is the public shame?

From St Andrew Scotland derived her patron and example. From scripture we get our values. In scripture we read:

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Where do we get our values and priorities from today? E-bay. X-factor and Human Rights? Who will be our patron? David Beckham? Kate Moss? Get back to the Bible; back to Jesus and we can be great again. Decline is not inevitable. We can have the fruits only if we have the roots, and the roots are in this book, which tell of Jesus, the secret of our greatness.