

Easter 2022

Dear sisters and brothers,

I am writing to you the day after my Induction as Moderator of the Free Churches Group and Free Church President of Churches Together in England at Wesley's Chapel in London while the great hymn singing is still ringing in my ears! To be able to hold the service there was a great joy and privilege, especially as so many senior representatives of the churches in the Free Church Group, friends and family were there to greet me in person. After two years of lockdown and restriction to our activity that was wonderful and I am grateful that because the service was live streamed from Wesley's Chapel many unable to travel were able to join us on zoom. The link to view the Service of Induction if you are interested is <https://youtu.be/93S4rE6eMDE>

I am following in the footsteps of some remarkable Methodists who have held this position. I am thinking of Baroness Rev'd Kathleen Richardson, the first female Chair of District and the first female President of the Conference and also the Rev'd Raymond George, but there are many others.

I found it very significant to be inducted as Moderator in the season of Passiontide and as we move towards Holy Week, Good Friday and Easter Day with a strong emphasis on the costly love we see displayed in Jesus, as he enters Jerusalem after weeping over it, and for it, and as he moves from the Temple, to a meal with his friends, to the garden, his arrest, torture and crucifixion. This year I am deeply conscious that we travel with Jesus through these days while Russia continues to bombard Ukraine and civilians are wounded and dying each day.

Two pieces of poetry are interwoven with my prayers at present. The first is a poem by the Rev'd Edward Shillito written in 1917 entitled "Jesus of the Scars". Edward Shillito was a Free Church minister, who served as a Congregational Military Chaplain in France and Belgium in the trenches of the First World War, returning to England from France and living until 1948.

"Jesus of the Scars" by Edward Shillito

*If we have never sought, we seek Thee now;
Thine eyes burn through the dark, our only stars;
We must have sight of thorn-pricks on Thy brow,
We must have Thee, O Jesus of the Scars.*

*The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;
In all the universe we have no place.
Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?
Lord Jesus, by Thy Scars, we claim Thy grace.*

*If, when the doors are shut, Thou drawest near,
Only reveal those hands, that side of Thine;*

*We know to-day what wounds are, have no fear,
Show us Thy Scars, we know the countersign.*

*The other gods were strong; but Thou wast weak;
They rode, but Thou didst stumble to a throne;
But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,
And not a god has wounds, but Thou alone.*

It is a very powerful poem, which speaks of God's willingness to bear our wounds and in bearing them and dying for us, lifting us from our wounds and indeed death itself in order that we might rise with him to new life, to life which is abundant, fruitful and eternal.

The second piece interwoven with my prayers at this time is a piece by Bill Vanstone which is included in hymnic form in *Singing the Faith* as the hymn "Morning glory, starlit sky" and to which I referred in my first sermon as Moderator.

*Therefore he who thee reveals,
Hangs O Father, on that tree,
Helpless; and the nails and thorns
Tell of what thy love must be.*

*Thou art God, no monarch thou,
Throned in easy state to reign;
Thou art God, whose arms of love
Aching, spent, the world sustain.*

What both of these pieces do is to help me as I reflect upon Scripture and the whole narrative of Holy Week to grasp more clearly and personally that we need to understand that our life in God is not dependent on our strength, autonomy and success as Church but rather on our utter dependence on, surrender to and need of God. So, I hope and trust that as you celebrate the resurrection of Jesus from death in Eastertide, and our rising with Christ, to life in God in all its fullness we will be confident in our witness, hope-filled even in times of war and atrocity in Ukraine and other nations no longer appearing on our daily news. May we be generous in our engagement with the communities we serve.

Yours in Christ,



Chair of the District