

## Carsphairn Bicentenary Communion Sermon

Carsphairn 5 July 2015

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### Talk

In the 1630s Carsphairn was far from the nearest parish church - what is now the parish consisting of the northern portion of Kells and Dalry parishes. Some local people of faith were determined to remedy the situation and set about building a church and employing a minister at their own expense. In November 1638 the people of Carsphairn petitioned the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland for assistance in paying their minister. In the minutes of the Assembly we read, 'Then there was a supplication presented in name of the Kirk of Carsphairn, which church lies in a very desolate wilderness, containing 500 communicants. It was builded by some gentlemen to their great expenses, only out of love to the salvation of the souls of a number of barbarous ignorant people, who heretofore have lived without the knowledge of God, their children unbaptised, their dead unburied.' The application was referred to a committee which recommended that aid should be afforded by a collection in every church south of the Tay to provide a stipend for the minister. This was approved. The following year the General Assembly referred the matter of the creation of this new parish to the Scottish Parliament and this was finally carried through into law in 1645 with an 'Act anent the creation of the kirk of Carsphairn'.

Thus Carsphairn parish was born. The main rectangular core of the building in which we are worshipping goes back to 1635 – or at least its footprint does - though there has been much rebuilding over the years. There was clearly an energy and enthusiasm to begin a new work for God in this new parish. But it was the inspired choice of the Presbytery in appointing as the first parish minister Rev John Semple, a revivalist preacher and man of the people, fresh from the revival in Ulster, that got the church off to a roaring start. Not only did he throw all his energies into discipling his new parishioners and building them up in the faith, but his communion seasons drew people from far and wide and really put Carsphairn on the map. We will be using shortly the silver communion cups he acquired in 1647. Not everyone was supportive of the charismatic zeal of John Semple. As early as 1648 we read that when some Scots regiments were on their way south, some of the soldiers, on hearing that the sacrament was to be dispensed the next Lord's day, put up their horses in the kirk and went to the manse and destroyed the communion elements in a most profane manner.

Mr Semple was not at home when they did this, but the next day he complained to the commanding officer, emphasising the vileness of their actions, and made such an impression on him that the officer apologised to him, punished those most guilty and even gave a generous gift to replace the destroyed communion elements.

He was not afraid to stand up to the most powerful in the land. Thomas MacCrie in his book 'Sketches of Scottish Reformation History from the Reformation to the Revolution' describes how in 1653 Oliver Cromwell marched into a meeting of ministers in Edinburgh and harangued them for nearly an hour 'in his usual style of rhapsody, and copiously interlarded with quotations from Scripture. The members looked at one another in bewildered amazement, till at length an old minister, Mr John Semple of Carsphairn, rose up and said: "Moderator, I hardly know what the gentleman would be at this long discourse; but one thing I am sure of, he was perverting the Scripture." For this speech the honest minister was punished by six months' imprisonment.'

It meant that when the times of persecution of the Covenanters began in the 1660s, there was a spiritual vitality amongst the people of Carsphairn that was unwilling to compromise over what they saw as central matters of the faith. They were determined to stand true to Christ whatever persecution they might have to face; and many suffered greatly in the decades that followed. No wonder that they were unimpressed when, after the death of John Semple in 1677, a curate by the name of Peter Peirson was appointed to Carsphairn. Peirson seems to have entered into a personal crusade to bring what he saw as these wild hill folk into submission to the new church order. Owing to his remaining celibate and living quite alone without a servant, he was suspected of catholic sympathies. He did all he could to force his parishioners to attend his services and was unsparing in his denunciation of those who did not attend and those who attended conventicles. He had a close relationship with the feared persecutor of the Covenanters, Robert Grierson of Lag, who owned land just outside the village and often based himself at Garryhorn less than a

mile from the village. In 1684 every minister was required to give in to the authorities a list of all in his parish above twelve years of age, and to indicate which of them were transgressors of the church laws by adding to their names the word *disorderly*, or by appending to the general list a separate one of the 'withdrawers from public worship'. Peirson took up this task with enthusiasm, and the fact that he labelled the great majority of his parishioners as disorderly shows that few had been attending his church services and the general detestation in which he was held. He was directly responsible for the arrest and subsequent death or transportation of 21 local men and women.

It all came to a head in December 1684 when a small delegation, supposedly unarmed, went to his manse demanding that he sign a paper agreeing to desist from all further informing against his parishioners. He met them at the door with sword and pistol and flew into a rage when he heard their demand. As he ushered them to the door one of the Covenanters, James McMichael, made a grab for him and there was a scuffle in which he was shot dead. McMichael claimed it was the minister's pistol, but he was disowned by the local Covenanting Society and within ten days was killed himself on Auchencloy Moor south of New Galloway.

### Sermon

Having been deeply affected by the traumas of the Covenanting period, Carsphairn remained strongly influenced by more radical Presbyterianism through much of the 1700s. Communion seasons remained important in the life of the church. And it is at this point I would like to give you more of an insight into the celebration of communion in those days by reading an extract from Henry Graham's excellent book entitled 'Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century':

(p.302) 'But all the functions of the ministers, all parts of the religious life of Scotland, sink into insignificance, compared with those connected with the Lord's Supper, known by names significant of their transcendent importance – the "Occasion", or the "Great Work", or the "Sacred Solemnity". It was held in a summer month – usually June or July – and was celebrated not more than once a year, often at intervals of two or three years. Sometimes eight or nine parishes joined together, the parishioners going in succession to each church, so that from June to August, in a district every second Sunday, people attended a great provincial communion, while their own kirk was shut up. After the approaching celebration was announced several weeks were spent by the clergyman visiting and catechising the persons in his bounds, parents and children, masters and servants. The elders were busy hearing reports and investigating rumours of scandal. More wholesomely they were directed in their several appointed districts to make up quarrels amongst neighbours and reconcile enemies before appearing at the Lord's table. In the Kirk Session there was the meeting held for private dealing with one another. Each elder in succession left the room, and in his absence the others were asked if they knew anything against their brother, and, if there was no objection, he was called in and "encouraged to continue his work in the Lord."

The news spreading far and wide that in a certain parish the "occasion" was to be celebrated, people from surrounding quarters prepared to be present – it being a regular compact of servants with their masters that they should be allowed to attend so many fairs or communions each year. The influx of strangers was enormous. A population of 500 might be swelled to 2000 by people who wended their way on foot or horse along the bridle-paths which served as roads, or over hills and moors, which had not even a track, to arrive in time for the "preachings" on Thursday, Saturday and Monday, as well as on the communion Sunday. If the minister had fame as a gospel preacher, and was therefore "much followed", as the phrase was, communicants would travel forty miles to be present. Shelter and food were not easily got, for provisions were scarce and houses were few. In the fields, in the fine moonlit nights – and they chose full moon for the occasion – in sheds, barns, and woods, or on the floor of the kirk, many sought rest. It naturally became a matter of grave concern how to feed the host of hungry people who had flocked in. The parishioners themselves were always poor; in the best of seasons corn was scarce with them, and there was little straw left to make beds. In bad weather Kirk Sessions in despair met for prayer and deliberation how to entertain so many folk, and where to procure oatmeal and barley meal for the hungry multitude. So great was the strain upon the slender resources of the farmers and labourers, that ministers were often compelled to defer the communion year after year, because they could not afford to feed so

many for several days together, and because the Session had not funds enough wherewith to buy sufficient wine for the Lord's table for such a concourse.'

He goes on (p.307), 'When the concourses were great the preachings were held in the field or churchyard, where the preachers in succession took their place in the wooden erection like a sentry-box, called the "tent". Meetings in the open air had a keen fascination for the people, especially in the western counties, for they were redolent of memories of the old days of persecution, when they had sat on the moors or grassy slopes in glens listening to the inspired words of covenanting ministers. There were two services and sermons on Thursday, two, or even three, on Saturday; and the long communion services of Sunday, with the "action sermon" preceding the Supper, were concluded by another sermon at night, to be succeeded by the Monday services. When the ministers engaged to preach on these occasions were popular and "gospel" men the crowds sitting around them were large and enraptured, and, moved by the strenuous voice from the tent, they burst into tears and sighs and groans. Curiosity and love of excitement were the feelings pervading hundreds in those gatherings. The appearance in the "tent" of a minister dry and "legal" was the signal for the bulk of the people to withdraw, and when he appeared to address a table there were hardly any could be coaxed by the elders to sit down to communicate. These preachers were vulgarly known as "yuill" (ale) ministers, because during their services the people resorted to the ale barrels. On the other hand, the field was crowded in dense masses round the box when someone who was a fervid, an "affectionate", preacher stood up to address them – men, who were known as "kail-pot preachers" because their thrilling appeals kept their audiences in rapt attention till night, all forgetful of the Sabbath kail simmering in the pot at home.

The communion services on Sunday in those days began usually at nine o'clock in the morning and continued till night, when a sermon wound up the laborious day. With 2000 communicants there would be thirty tables, each to be addressed by ministers in turn before the elements were handed round. The elements varied in different districts. In Galloway it was shortbread... The wine was sack or claret in the early part of the century, for port was little known and rarely used, though in some places ale was served... The services were not seldom deeply impressive and picturesque when held in the open air, especially when the tables were laid on trestles on the grass... Even the long drawn-out psalm tunes, although broken by each line being read out and sung in turn, rose plaintive and sweet from a throng of voices; and the prayers, with their earnest, weeping pleading, came forth in a stillness broken only by sudden sighs and crying out, or the sharp cry of the curlew in the heather, and the song of the lark overhead.'

We have an insight into what happened here in Carsphairn through preserved church accounts for 1737 and 1772-1782. In 1737 Andrew Reid was ordained as the new minister in May and there was a big ordination dinner served with lamb and ale and home baking. Communion wasn't celebrated that year; but on four occasions there was no service at Carsphairn because the minister was called to assist at the sacrament of the Lord's supper in other places – on June 19<sup>th</sup> at Balmaclellan, June 26<sup>th</sup> at Dalmellington, July 10<sup>th</sup> at Kirkinner and July 31<sup>st</sup> at Kells. And no doubt many of the Carsphairn folk went with him.

William Boyd, the minister between 1756 and 1772, was never accepted by the majority of parishioners. He was too much of a moderate for them, and communion was never celebrated during his ministry. But a new ministry under John Campbell was the incentive for a new beginning in other ways too. Plans drawn up under Boyd's ministry for the seating of the church and the building of a central communion table were implemented; and on Sunday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1775 communion was celebrated for the first time in many years around the newly constructed long communion table which we still have today. There were services on the Thursday before, which was a fast day, and the Saturday, which was a preparation day. And then on the Monday, which was a thanksgiving day. And we find out from the church accounts that there were three further communion seasons in the seven succeeding years up to 1782. With communion celebrated on Sundays 15<sup>th</sup> December 1776, 27<sup>th</sup> July 1777 and 18<sup>th</sup> July 1779. Surprising that one of those occasions was just before Christmas. In the last two instances the fast day was on the Wednesday. There's mention of how much a local lady was paid for washing the table linen after the celebration of communion. Also of the cost of nails for repairing the tent – and even that the workmen who built the tent

were afterwards given ale to the value of fourpence halfpenny. Did they get a couple of pints each for their work?

Alexander Dick was minister of Dalry from 1740 to 1783, and we're fortunate to possess the vast majority of the sermons he preached throughout his long ministry – from his licensing in 1731 right up to 1773. I have recently transcribed one sermon he preached here in Carsphairn on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1754, during the vacancy before Mr Boyd was installed. He preached a sermon nearly half an hour long on the first two verses of Psalm 40 and I thought I would present an extract to give you a flavour of the kind of sermon that was preached here in Carsphairn 261 years ago. I remind you again of the words of the first two verses of Psalm 40, reading this time from the KJV:

'I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unto me, and heard my cry. He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my goings.'

In the words of Mr Dick:

'But secondly and 'tis more particularly expressive of David's way of waiting; the way he was resigned when he's waiting for the Lord. David he takes himself to prayer, that never failing mean of relief – David had found the benefit of prayer before now, and now he will again try what he can make of prayer – he prays and he cries. He prays with strong grief, and tears: I waited patiently for the Lord, and he inclined to me, and heard my cry. The Lord's people are not for a noisy kind of religion, and neither do they want that the world should know what passes between God and them in their secret retirements; and therefore and if they must speak out in prayer, they choose hard places for the duty, as they can't apprehend any danger of being overheard by the unrighteous. But modest as the believer is, and cautious as he is – and though for ordinary his voice is not heard, yet there are times when he's put to cry and make a noise – he must cry; he can't help it. And do you know the reasons of this, and the cause whence it proceeds? We need not cry in order that God may hear us; for he hears the voice of our breathing – our very thoughts, if I may speak so; all and every one of them he knows them afar off. But first, will a night of trouble, and the most grievous and acute pains of body make one cry? Will one cry out of an aching or dislocate or broken bone? There's no doubt he will cry, if he is able at all to cry – though sometimes also, as David says, the trouble is so great that the man can't speak – he's dead and stupid and senseless under it. But will he not cry? I was saying if he be able to cry. Yes surely – and will ye be surprised that a person should cry, that keep himself under a heavy load of guilt, and is therefore spiritually wounded; the arrows of God, the terrors and threatenings of the law of God, sticking deep and thick in the conscience and the poison thereof drinking up the very spirits.'

And then, a little further on:

'Fourthly, and to say no more about it; many a poor believer cries, to drown the clamour and noise that's within him; the clamour of hell, and the evil heart. The noise of temptations; and vile noisy suggestions of atheism and unbelief. By reason of which the man is often that he can't hear himself. And this is especially intended when David says that he was in an horrible pit; a loud sounding and dinsome pit. And this not only made him to pray, but to pray with cries, afraid and with tears too. Are you, my friends, in any kind of distress? And need not after that. But what ever your distress is felt or feared. I'm afraid there may be heavier trials before us, than any here before. The Lord seems to be threatening to come out of his place to punish the inhabitants of the earth, and to make a great sacrifice. O go to him by prayer. And believe that the prayer of faith shall prevail. Earnest, fervent, importunate prayer – pray without ceasing and pray without fainting. Be instant in prayer and persevere therein - and watch unto prayer and wait in prayer. See if you can pray under the influence of the Spirit, who is a Spirit of intercession in the saints. Pray in Christ's name; and with a view to Christ's mediation. Plead the promises; plead your necessity and plead the glory of God's great name; the glory of his goodness and faithfulness and grace and mercy and love. And thus you'll be relieved and delivered. And thus at least you'll get your soul's for a pray. And neither the strife daily that may come; nor death itself shall part Christ and you. David prayed and he was helped; do ye as he did. And you'll be helped as he was. But for you that are prayerless folks; you that don't cry to God when he binds you; and you that in your affliction of one sort or other, don't seek

God early and don't make your prayer and your moan to him. There's no encouragement to you. You're cursed in every lot and condition; cursed in prosperity and cursed in adversity; there's a curse in all you have and the curse of God follows you whithersoever you go – in the house, and in the field; at home, or abroad wherever you are – O cry to be put among the children, cry for a spirit of faith and prayer and of all grace. And then, and though you should be in trouble and long in trouble, you'll be delivered at last.'

Well, I end my extract just after the half way point in his sermon. You can read the whole of it in the Heritage Centre exhibition. Perhaps a little less fire and brimstone than I expected I might find. Rather a call to faith and trust in God.

And as we come towards the time for communion we look now to Jesus' words in John Ch.6 shortly after the feeding of the five thousand. Jesus declared: 'The bread that God gives is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world. I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never be thirsty. I will never turn away anyone who comes to me, because I have come down from heaven to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me. And it is the will of him who sent me that I should not lose any of all those he has given me, but that I should raise them all to life on the last day. For what my Father wants is that all who see the Son and have faith in him should have eternal life. And I will raise them to life on the last day.'

We would come to the living Christ who is amongst us by his Spirit. The same Christ who moved in the hearts of his people here over 350 years ago in the time of John Semple. This Jesus who is the same yesterday, today and forever and is a solid rock upon whom to found our lives. Through Christ may we be numbered among God's children. May we come to him and be nourished in our innermost spirits as we take of the bread and wine. May we rejoice in the goodness and faithfulness and grace and mercy and love of God, and open our hearts to him that we might receive from him. We come seeking his grace and forgiveness for the times we have fallen short. We come to receive his life, as we call him to take up residence in our lives to satisfy the deepest thirst and hunger within us, and to open up for us a way leading even to eternity and eternal life. We come to him praying that he would inspire us to a deeper and more committed walk with him into the days that lie before us, that he would give us a fresh vision of his purposes of love towards each one of us and a fresh vision of his love for those around us who yet walk in darkness.

Christ calls. May we come to him and commit our lives afresh into his hands, resolving to follow him into the future whatever it may hold – knowing that although we do not know what the future holds, he holds the future, and our lives are safe with him to all eternity. Amen.