



**SERMON PREACHED BY
REV. ALASTAIR SYMINGTON
on Sunday 4 September 2016
on the occasion of the
Bicentenary Celebration
of the
Invention of the Stirling Engine**

Ephesians 3 v 7

'Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me.'

It's not so easy as a minister to speak dispassionately of another minister - but despite the fact that today's service is a wonderful celebration primarily expressed in music for which we thank Graeme and the Choir - it is necessary that we pause for a few minutes and do just that - let me speak as a minister of another.

We have lauded the scientific brilliance of Robert Stirling and rightly so. And in circles far more competent than can be found with me, there are those who have marvelled and will continue to marvel at what Robert conceived and brought to fruition - a scientific phenomenon in use to this day and at the highest level of practise. And it was in 1816 that his heat engine was patented.

But it was also in 1816 that something of equal significance took place - he was ordained to the office of the Holy Ministry in the Laigh Kirk in Kilmarnock. His calling, his training, his passion for Christ - and in 1816 he set out to serve his Lord. Through the generations since the church was established on the day of Pentecost, so it has been - men and now, of course, women called by God to minister the truths of the Gospel to the people of God. Preachers and pastors, teachers and leaders - the history of the last two millennia is written large by those who have commended Christ to the world.

And their bedrock, if they are faithful to their calling at all, is this very rationale of ministry offered by Paul to the Christians in Ephesus. By this stage he was in jail for preaching Christ and was nearing what would be his own beheading in Rome under the tyranny of Nero. But his life's work was as stated in this verse - *Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace.* Nothing else - only a minister of the Gospel and as so many who have followed him, faithful to the end -

and all achieved through the grace of God alone..

So in these steps walked you minister in this parish - Robert Stirling. Time has moved on and there are none here who remember him even if they had heard their great granny talk of him. But the mark he left in this parish is indelible. He came here in 1824 and by the time of his death in 1878 he had become the father of the Church of Scotland - in other words its longest serving ordained minister - and he had the perception of the folk of this parish by his love, his kindness, his courage and his proclamation of the Gospel. Records survive in sufficient number to tell of who he was and what he did. He was an inspiring preacher, by all accounts, so that he received the rare honour of being invited to preach at a General Assembly sitting in 1832 - the Assembly back then being a much more commanding and important body than it is in our own time.

He was a wonderful pastor to his people - epitomised in 1848 to 1849 when a devastating outbreak of cholera affected the town. Robert Stirling went into his parish and into the homes of the parish with no consideration of his own safety. It is said in a little booklet commemorating this bi-centenary that he 'proved his true courage as a man of Christ. Fearlessly he went about the homes struck down by cholera. He ministered to the physical and spiritual wants of the sufferers. He toiled among them night and day. He tended them. He prayed with them. And he buried them.' And when it was all over, a group in the parish invited him to the then Black Bull in the town and there presented him with a service of silver plate and a gold watch in token of gratitude to all he had done. And beyond all that there was the memory of many of this committed minister walking the streets of the town, caring for his folk and talking their needs to his heart and into his prayers.

And he was deeply involved in the educational structures of the town. Back then, education was in the care of the church and together with a local philanthropist Mr Charles Blair, he gave his much needed support to a project of a new school in Polwarth Street, endowing prizes which persisted through to the late 1980's - so that I imagine some of you here may well have been recipients.

All this happening while he was also a very happy family man. He married Jean Rankin when he was 28 years of age and she was but 19 - and he was a devoted husband and also father to their seven children. As a minister I know how difficult it can be at times to blend family life with the life of ministry but Robert achieved it all and set an example of family life to the

parish.

And so I stand now in this pulpit - not where Robert stood for it was a gift to Galston from his family back in 1909, in recognition of all that he had been and done for our forebears here. When a minister is ordained - and so it has been since the days of reformation - he is surrounded by his fellow ministers who lay hands on him and thus pass down the commission of Christ through the generations. It is one of the most moving and telling moments in a minister's life. When this happened in my life almost 45 years ago, I recall them being deeply aware of the communion of saints who were in their day ministers of the church. And Robert no doubt was one of them - and remains to this day at the time of ordination.

But whatever a man achieves and whatever trinkets he may wear, we stand first and foremost in the tradition of St Paul:

Of this Gospel I was made a minister according to the gift of God's grace that was given to me. Robert Stirling fulfilled that role for 54 years here and I do not believe that the town of Galston would be the same today had he not ministered God to the people for over half a century.

There is a little book called the Minister's Prayer Book. I have held one since I was licenced to be a minister in 1971. And in my wallet I carry one bound little section of that book to be my constant reminder of who I am and what I am called to be. And appropriate as I find it to be for me to try to achieve - even more do I think that Robert achieved it fully, looking back on his ministry. It says this:

To solve one human problem is a far more significant performance, will yield me in the end far deeper satisfaction and will make a far greater contribution to human welfare, then to stand on any eminence to be seen and known of men. A minister ought to have no higher ambition than to qualify as a faithful shepherd of his flock. The word 'pastor' must be his highest title of honour. Indeed there can be no higher: for only he has fulfilled the divine commission of his Lord: Feed my lambs. Feed my sheep - not only publically but from house to house.

A minister - my brother Robert - according to the gift of God's grace. And thanks to Almighty God for all he did and all he was.



A.S.