

The Michael Bruce Service of Commemoration

Addresses 2011-2023

After 2 years without a commemoration service due to the Covid pandemic, it was with great pleasure that we were able to welcome back Very Rev. Dr Angus Morrison to give the address in 2022.

Harry McLennan

One of the great pleasures of my decade-long ministry in the Parish of Orwell and Portmoak has been the annual Michael Bruce Service of Commemoration, held in Portmoak Church on the first Sunday of July. In each of these years, apart from 2020 and 2021, when services were not held on account of the pandemic, a guest preacher was invited to address a theme of their choice, in some related to the life and work of the ‘Gentle Poet of Loch Leven’.

The addresses delivered on these occasions were invariably interesting and illuminating. Each speaker developed their own particular approach. The Chair and members of the Michael Bruce Trust agreed it would be helpful to make these addresses available to a wider public by having them placed on the Michael Bruce website. The preachers concerned kindly gave permission for their use in this way. I am grateful to our Chair, Professor David Munro OBE, for providing – below - an outline history of the Michael Bruce Commemorative Services.

The following nine addresses are reproduced with minimal editing. We are indebted to Harry McLennan, a member of the Michael Bruce Trust, for valued technical support. We hope that a wider readership will find in the addresses the same enjoyment as those who heard them when first delivered, and that they will contribute to greater knowledge and appreciation of our Gentle Poet.

Angus Morrison

In Memory of Michael Bruce – The Annual Service of Commemoration

The founding of the Michael Bruce Memorial Trust at a meeting held on 1st July 1903 offered an opportunity to seek new ways of keeping alive the memory of Michael Bruce, the ‘Gentle Poet of Loch Leven’. The poet’s cottage, which had been saved from dereliction by David Marshall and Robert Burns Begg in the late 1860s, was opened as a museum in July 1906 and in 1922 an endowment fund was raised by Trust chairman James Mackenzie in order to maintain the cottage in Kinnesswood in perpetuity.

Just over a decade later the Trustees decided to initiate an annual service of commemoration to be held in Portmoak Parish Church on a Sunday evening in July close to the anniversary of the poet’s death on 5th July 1767. The first service was conducted in 1935 by the Reverend William Adam, minister of the Parish of Portmoak, who also gave the address to a congregation drawn from all quarters of Fife and Kinross and beyond, including detachments of Girl Guides and Boys’ Brigade from Kirkcaldy and Dundee. Scripture lessons were read by the Trust chairman James Melville Mackenzie and Paraphrases and Hymns written by Michael Bruce were sung.

A year later, in 1936, the tradition of inviting a special guest speaker to give the address was initiated. On this occasion the commemorative address was given by local historian Robert S Young, FSAScot. In 1937, for the first time, a wreath was laid by the Trust Chairman at the end of the service on the poet’s grave. Thereafter, the annual service has included from time to time music provided by local singers and musicians as well as the reading of lines by Michael Bruce. To mark the bicentenary of the birth of the poet in 1746, the praise was led in July 1946 by the Trust Ladies Choir and the *Ode to the Cuckoo* was sung by the Scotlandwell School Choir. In that year, the address was given by the Reverend J G Dawson Scott, Logiealmond, on the theme of ‘The uphill road of genius’.

The annual commemorative services continued throughout the Second World War but during the Covid pandemic of 1920-21 no services were held for the first time since 1935. However, in both these years brief memorial events were held with the laying of a wreath on the poet's grave.

David Munro

1. Very Rev Dr Sheilagh Kesting 3rd July 2011

Isaiah 2:2-5 'Walking in the light of God' (v5)

This year of all years perhaps adds another dimension to the commemoration of Michael Bruce. For this year we mark the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, the version that shaped the English language and the faith of generations, not just in this country and its near neighbours, but wherever on earth English was taught and spoken. One of the delights of this year is hearing again the old words, so rich and poetic, and for people of my vintage and older, remembering the passages we learnt by heart in school and in Sunday school.

It was this version of the Bible that gave us our metrical Psalms and the paraphrases. Putting the words into easily remembered meter meant that in an age when many could not read, they could nonetheless sing their faith. And it is the combination often of words and music that reaches so deeply into our very beings, so that the two

together, words and music, live on in our memories. We draw on them for comfort or when we need to express thanksgiving to a generous God, creator, redeemer and friend. There is always something to match our mood or our need. Which, I suppose, is why we get so upset when someone changes the tune or plays around with the words to make them politically correct for today's world - although I would defend the need to do that!

Reading through the paraphrases attributed to Michael Bruce, you realise that only a few have survived as words we still sing to this day. That is not to say that the ones we do not sing are in any sense inferior poetically to the ones we do sing. It has, I think, to do with the extent to which what we sing needs to resonate with our context today. Michael Bruce, of course, wrote from his own context. The paraphrases are riddled with thoughts of death and dying - and who could blame him? Death and dying were all too frequently a part of everyday life. He was one of eight children, only three of whom lived to adulthood and he himself died, as we know, so tragically young at 21. As Edward Vernon says in his introduction to the Life and Works of Michael Bruce, Michael Bruce writes as 'a soul that finds itself immured within a fragile bodily dwelling, whose roof must soon collapse and whose walls must crumble speedily to decay.' It is not the world we live in - at least not here in the West, though there are times, certainly, when we are made painfully aware of the fragility of our bodies, but it's not an over-riding, imprisoning context. We are

less doom-laden. Life is not, for most us at any rate, 'a weary pilgrimage' - a pilgrimage, yes, but not necessarily so weary. There are worlds to explore, people to meet from different cultures, new discoveries to be made that open up the world of nature that was so precious to Michael Bruce, opening it up to new depths of awe and understanding, making new discoveries that offer health and healing unimaginable in his day.

And yet the themes in the paraphrases we are singing this evening are themes which do endure, themes that have a lasting relevance in our world today and that still act as channels through which we can express our faith.

Both the paraphrase we began with, 'Sing to the Lord in joyful strains' and the one with which we will end, 'Behold, the mountain of the Lord, in latter days shall rise' share a vision that is typical of the period when the kingdoms Israel and Judah were in exile in Babylon. Isaiah paints a picture of a coming together of disparate peoples, responding to Israel's God, a movement of praise and worship that brings healing to the nations and rejoicing in all the earth. The natural world is caught up into the celebration and, crucially, there is no more war. With a country emerging from the battles of the 45 rebellion, is it any surprise that Michael Bruce sought to improve these two pre-existing paraphrases:

To this the joyful nations round,

*All tribes and tongues shall flow
Up to the hill of God, they'll say,
And to his house we'll go....*

*No strife shall rage, nor hostile feuds
Disturb those peaceful years;
To ploughshares men will beat their swords,
To pruning-hooks their spears. (Par 18)*

Or

*O City of the Lord! Begin
The universal song;
And let the tenants of the rock
With accents rude rejoice;*

*Till midst the streams of distant lands
The islands sound his praise;
And all combin'd, with one accord,
Jehovah's glories raise.*

Both are rich pictures of harmony. And they resonate down through the centuries. For there is never a time when cruelty and oppression and violence of many kinds do not afflict people in different circumstances and in different cultures. Today the world has shrunk.

We get to hear what is happening in different places and are affected by the desperate conditions many have to face. And through it all, there comes another voice, the voice of people of faith who are driven by a different vision, a vision of an end to conflict, of nations streaming together, combining their energies so that their accord reveals the glories of God.

In May, on the other side of the world, in Jamaica, some 800 people gathered to mark the end of a decade to overcome violence: churches working for a culture of peace. In the message they produced they agreed that war is never justified and that what we need to be doing as churches today is to set out the requirements of a just peace.

The beam that shines from Sion hill

Shall light'n every land

The King who reigns in Salem's tow'rs

Shall all the world command.

Today we would more emphasise the common concern for peace in all the major world religions. There are inter-religious initiatives at various levels that are actively seeking ways in which people of faith the world over can work together for peace among the nations. An international group of Islamic leaders wrote to the Pope and other Christian world leaders some four years ago, pointing out that between our two faiths we account for more than 50% of the world's population. So, they said, if we cannot find ways to live in peace with

each other as Christians and Muslims there is no hope for peace in the world. A significant statement in the wake of 9/11 and 7/7 and the continuing violence in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Indonesia, Sudan, Nigeria and so on and so on where inter faith conflict fuels the pain and misery of countless communities and families. People of faith are driven by the vision of God who wills peace on earth.

Yes, the implements of war may be very different in our day, yet we can still sing, 'to ploughshares men will beat their swords, to pruning hooks their spears'. The Christian message is profoundly that the latter days are now. The dreams of these days of peace in the world, when, in the words of Micah, people will do justice and love mercy and walk humbly with God, these dreams are for realising in the here and now and not over some distant horizon. Resurrection bursts into time, the end is anticipated, our lives must be a constant movement through dying to all kinds of things that we hold dear so that we can come to new life, so that we can live now the life of God's peace, a peace that is built on justice for all, a justice that includes the way we treat the environment in which we live and the way we use the resources of the earth.

But Michael Bruce didn't just draw on this big picture, a God of the nations, a God whose peace affected the world of nature as much as the human world. He also has quite a lot to say about the way in

which God relates to us in a very personal way. In paraphrase 11 he draws on the ancient tradition of wisdom, an interesting strand of thought in the Hebrew Scriptures. Wisdom is an attribute of God, with God in the beginning. A few chapters further on in the Book of Proverbs, chapter 8, Wisdom is depicted as existing with God before creation, present with God as the earth was given its shape, beside God 'as a master worker' in the act of creation and rejoicing in the inhabited world and delighting in the human race. In the last chapter of the Book of Proverbs, Wisdom is pictured as a perfect woman, out of our reach, yet an aspiration, representing for us the values that are the values of God, creative and nurturing, practical and spiritual, loving and forgiving. It is this divine Wisdom that acts as a guide; that shows us the values that are the values of God, the values that are more precious than the material rewards in which we put so much trust, the values that bring happiness through the ways of peace. And therein lies the thread that holds together the past and the present; the thread that looks to the future, that links us to one another and to all who share our humanity; the thread that links earth to heaven and heaven to earth, the thin places that George Macleod spoke of where we are made aware of a mystery that draws us beyond the reality of our present circumstances and calls from us more than we ever imagined we could give.

Wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, what Michael Bruce knew and what we can still hold onto is the invitation that is never

withdrawn but which continues to beckon us

... to walk in the light of God.

Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit

As it was in the beginning, is now and shall be forever, world without end. **Amen.**

2. Rev. Duncan Stenhouse 1st July 2012

MICHAEL BRUCE 1746—1767. The Gentle Poet of Lochleven. Brief Background. Michael Bruce was born in a humble cottage in Kinnesswood in March 1746, the son of a weaver. He died on 5th July 1767 aged 21 years. It's so remarkable what he achieved and what he gave to his generation and to the generations long after him, ours included, in such a short life. Perhaps it is also worth reminding ourselves of the age into which he was born. On the national stage Scotland was a poor country, with the first shoots of hope of a better life to come after the Union with England; the Jacobite Rising of 1745 was just past before Michael was born; the early signs of the Enlightenment were there; Edinburgh was emerging on the European stage as the Athens of the North.

Here in Portmoak and Kinnesswood life was generally very simple: farming was still to experience the Agricultural Revolution; there were the necessary crafts for local sustenance E.G. weaving; there was schooling locally, and there was the opportunity for the Michael Bruce's of any parish to fulfil their potential, given parental determination and a little financial help. In Michael's case the financial help came from a "God-send" of a legacy of £11 2s 2d (that is how the family regarded it) from a deceased relative. This money was used to finance Michael's studies at Edinburgh University from 1762 until 1765. Although he did not graduate, this was no reflection upon his abilities, rather a reflection upon a change in arrangements at

the university at the time. There is no doubt that he was highly regarded by his teachers there.

On the local scene we must also remember that Michael Bruce was born into the parish in which the Rev Ebenezer Erskine had led the first Secession from the Church of Scotland in 1732, having been minister of Portmoak and Kinnesswood for 27 years, before moving to Stirling. It is said that Michael Bruce's admiration for Ebenezer Erskine was a strong influence upon his decision to study theology. However, ministry in the church was not to be. After leaving Edinburgh at age of almost nineteen Michael Bruce came home to Kinross-shire where he was employed as a schoolteacher, first at Gairney Bridge then at Forest Mill. In between these teaching posts, he studied theology at the "Theological Hall" in Kinross, but his studies were cut short when the Hall was forced to close.

It was in early Summer 1767 that he fell from his pony into the Black Devon on his way to his teaching post at Forest Mill, and some would say that he got such a soaking that his health suffered badly. Michael was unhappy in his Forest Mill post; the school building was a miserable, unhealthy hovel; he missed the countryside around Kinnesswood, and his ailing health was giving cause for concern. In February 1767 he left Forest Mill to return home, but alas, not to good health, and very sadly he died on fifth July 1767 at home. That potted biography does not do justice to the man that Michael Bruce was, but it perhaps fills in gaps for anyone present this evening who does not know a lot about Michael Bruce.

What I wish to do now is give some idea of our indebtedness to Michael Bruce as Church people. As many know, he was a writer of Paraphrases, metrical renderings of Bible passage for congregations so that they might understand and remember them, and of course sing them.

"O God of Bethel by whose hand thy people still are fed...." a paraphrase of Genesis Chapter 28 verses 20-22. Jacob's dream at Bethel.....Jacob's Ladder and all that.

"Behold! the mountain of the Lord in latter days shall rise.." Isaiah 2 verses 2-6 Isaiah's wonderful vision of all the nations coming to worship the God of Israel.

Proverbs 3: 13-17

"Happy is the man who hears
instruction's warning voice;
And who celestial Wisdom makes
his early, only choice.

For she has treasures greater far
than east or west unfold;
And her rewards more precious are
than all their stores of gold.

In her right hand she holds to view
a length of happy days;
Riches with splendid honours join'd,
are what her left displays.

She guides the young with innocence,
in pleasure's paths to tread,
A crown of glory she bestows
upon the hoary head.

According to her labours rise,

so her rewards increase;
Her ways are ways of pleasantness,
and all her paths are peace.

Michael Bruce's paraphrase of these verses from Proverbs 3 sum up the route which he took through life. Sad reality is that he never reached the maturity of years of the "hoary head".

The Church of Scotland and the Church in Scotland owes a debt of gratitude to this young man. What might he have given us had he lived another 21 years?

As we pay our respects and offer our gratitude for our inheritance, we must be careful not to picture Michael Bruce as some lonely, inherently weak young man. At the age of ten during his Summer holidays from school he herded sheep on the Lomond Hills, just as other boys his age did. Whilst being a God-fearing young man, writer of Paraphrases and poems, he was well-liked by his peer group and adults alike.

Remember too that Michael Bruce strode out from Kinnesswood for Edinburgh, walked to the ferry at Pettycur, made the crossing of the Forth to Leith, and then made his way still on foot to the dark, reekie streets of Edinburgh's High Street to the Grassmarket, at the age of 16.

Michael used his skills as a poet to express advice to others. I am sure his brother James would treasure this poem, if not as a young man, probably later in life. Perhaps the poem was inspired by Proverbs 3. Michael wrote this poem for James when he heard that James had begun to learn weaving, his father's trade.

"Weaving Spiritualised"

A web I hear thou hast begun,
And know'st not when it may be done---

So death uncertain see ye fear---

For ever distant, ever near.

See'st thou the shuttle quickly pass---

Think mortal life is as the grass---

And empty cloud--a morning dream---

A bubble rising on the stream.

The knife still ready to cut off

Excrescent knots that mar the stuff,

To stern affliction's rod compare---

'tis for thy good, so learn to bear.

Too full a quill oft checks the speed

Of shuttle flying by the reed---

So riches oft keep back the soul,

That else would hasten to its goal.

Thine eye the web runs keenly o'er

For things amiss, unseen before---

Thus scan thy life--mend what's amiss---

Next day correct the faults of this.

For, when the web is at an end,

'Tis then too late a fault to mend---

Let thought of this awaken dread---
repentance dwells not with the dead.

Quite a little sermon for brother James! And just to prove that Michael Bruce was a normal type, here is a poem in which a "Peggy" is mentioned. This "Peggy" is Margaret White who lived with her father at Kinnesswood.

"Pastoral Song"

In May when the gowans appear on the green;
And flowers in the field and the forest are seen;
Where lilies bloom bonny, and the hawthorn springs,
The yellow-haired laddie oft whistles and sings.

But neither the shades, nor the sweets of the flowers,
Nor the blackbirds that warbled on blossoming bowers,
Could pleasure his eye, or his ear entertain;
For love was his pleasure, and love was his pain.

The shepherd thus sung, while his flocks all around
Drew nearer and nearer, and sigh'd to the sound;
Around us in chains lay the beasts of the wood,
With pity disarm'd with music subdu'd.

Young Jessie is fair as the spring's early flower,
And Mary sings sweet as the bird in her bower
But Peggy is fairer and sweeter than they;

With looks like the morning, with smiles like the day.

In the flower of her youth, in the bloom of eighteen,
Of virtue the goddess, of beauty the queen,
One hour in her presence an era excels
Amid courts where ambition with misery dwells.

Fair to the shepherd the new-springing flowers,
When May and when morning lead on the gay hours;
But Peggy is brighter and fairer than they:
She's fair as the morning, and lovely as May.

Sweet to the shepherd the wild woodland sound,
When larks sing above him, and lambs bleat around;
But Peggy, far sweeter can speak and can sing
Than the notes of the warblers that welcome the Spring.

When in beauty she moves by the brook of the plain,
You could call her a Venus new sprung from the main;
When she sings, and the woods with their echoes reply,
You would think that an angel was warbling on high.

Ye pow'rs that preside over mortal estate!
Whose nod ruleth Nature, whose pleasure is fate;
O grant me, O grant me, the heav'n of her charms!

May I live in her presence and die in her arms.

What a lovely poem! Heart-felt from the same author of the paraphrases. Good to know he was a real, rounded young man. A young man of God in the real world.

And now to end this brief appreciation of the Gentle Poet of Lochleven, I am going to read a hymn written by Michael Bruce. After some discussion apparently, it was adopted by the Paraphrase Committee, for inclusion in their canon of Paraphrases. It reveals Michael Bruce's simple Christian faith, and I believe this paraphrase became a comfort to the dying because of the Christian hope and assurance expressed therein.

"Dying In The Lord"

The hour of my departure's come;
I hear the voice that calls me home
At last, O Lord! let trouble cease,
And let thy servant die in peace.

The race appointed I have run;
The combat's o'er, the prize is won;
And now my witness is on high,
And now my record's in the sky.

Not in my innocence I trust;
I bow before thee in the dust;
And through my Saviour's blood alone
I look for mercy at thy throne.

I leave the world without a tear,
Save for the friends I hold so dear;
To heal their sorrows, Lord descend,
And to the friendless prove a friend.

I come, I come at thy command,
I give my spirit to thy hand;
Stretch forth thy everlasting arms,
And shield me in the last alarms.

The hour of my departure's come;
I hear thy voice that calls me home;
Now, O my God! let trouble cease;
Now let thy servant die in peace.

I am greatly indebted for much of the information expressed in this appreciation of Michael Bruce to the "Bi-centenary Edition of the Complete Works of Michael Bruce which includes a review of the life of the Poet by The Rev. Edward Vernon M.A."

3. Rev. Dr Douglas Galbraith 7th July 2013

Reading: Exodus 35:4-10, 20-21, 30-35.

Browsing in one of the many second-hand bookshops in Wigtown

earlier this year I picked up an old volume by one Hugh Haliburton (a pseudonym as Professor Munro told me). Dated 1894, it consisted of essays on the language, life and literature of Old Scotland, a few of which were about Loch Leven and the lands about. I am sorry to say he is rather rude about *Kinross*. It's only importance for him is as an adjunct to the loch, where to his mind the real action is, and that action is the trout rising to the lure. 'Dingy, little, old, antiquated, dull, lack-lustre, mean' were some of the adjectives used for the town, and what's more, he complains, it has a uniquely terrible climate!

Kinnesswood also gets a mention, but not one it might covet, as a 'sombre and slumbrous village', a 'hillside hamlet of peat-reek and Puritanism'. Now isn't that a terrible way for a preacher to begin a sermon in its parish church!

However, the author is making a contrast between the district he sees in his time and how it used to be - and no doubt, if he'd thought of it, how it was to become if one fast-forwarded into the twenty first century and saw these vibrant communities with their festivals, history trails, nature reserve, museums, heritage projects - and he probably never dreamt of T in the Park. But what it *used* to be like he knows because of the testimony of one Michael Bruce, who in his writings reveals a group of communities of lively weavers, known as far afield as Anster Fair and beyond, who gave the town its high reputation along with another group of craftsmen, the cutlers, for everyone knew that the most trustworthy steel blades came from

Kinross. 'They were the crack of Fife', says our author. 'They were sought for at every Scottish fair, were in every packman's box or bundle, in every ploughboy's pouch.'

As we know, Bruce came from such a family of weavers, as devout as they were creative, passionately involved in the religious debates of the time, glorying in the singing of the psalms, but he also stood within a tradition of wordsmiths. Andrew of Wyntoun, prior of the Culdee community on St Serfs Isle, was the famous author of the long poem the *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* of about 1400, while the priory held some of the earliest books of liturgy and holy learning in the land, and happily which are still in existence. From within this wonderful succession of Christian witness and learning on the one hand, coupled with the way with words of poet and prophet, all mixed in with the popular piety raised in song in the psalms of David, came the new voice of the Gentle Poet of Loch Leven.

In the very year Michael Bruce was born, psalm singing in the Scottish church reached a crisis. This was symbolised by a resolution of the General Assembly of the same year, 1746, that no longer should precentors 'read the line', the practice known as 'lining out' by which the leader of the song recited the words of each line as they came to it in a monotone so that the congregation knew what to sing. The truth is that this custom which came in with the new psalter from South of the Border and the Westminster Assembly in 1650 was never

really necessary, since the level of reading ability in Scotland was sufficiently high for most people to read every line for themselves. How otherwise could the Scottish Parliament in 1579 have made it a law that all households should possess a psalm book for family use. The instruction of the Assembly to drop this tedious habit was vehemently resisted by a large number of congregations who held to the theological doctrine of 'it's aye been', but this stop-and-start style of singing was not the only problem. Excessively ponderous speeds, wobbly ornamentation which obscured the tune, the absence of beauty and harmony, caused church music to fall far short of the new music of the concert halls and the drawing rooms of the time. The other problem was that those who wished to glory in the new covenant of Jesus Christ had only the words of the old covenant with which to do this. There was growing discomfort at the restrictiveness of the psalms as the sole diet, because, to quote a minute from the Presbytery of Paisley of 1747, when Bruce was taking his first tottering steps, 'the solemn praises of a New Testament Church are too much limited when confined entirely to ... Old Testament composes'.

In these few dramatic years, coinciding with Bruce's growth to maturity, two things happened. One was a new style of psalm singing, stemming from what was known as the Monymusk Revival, spreading from the north east down to the cities of the central belt. At that time people had come to know only a few tunes, the common

tunes, which fitted most psalms. But now new tunes were being written, and they were to be sung by all in harmony, and at a good speed, and forbye it was only to be the plain tune itself and no fancy ornaments. So infuriated was one Aberdeen writer by this 'new-fangled profanation' that he declared it a worse disaster than the 1745 rebellion. Many agreed, but not enough and soon afterwards, eight enthusiastic 'classes' in psalm singing were established in Edinburgh, regulated by a committee of the great and the good who also sanctioned any new tunes sung in the parish kirks. For its part, Glasgow opened a 'free school... to encourage and promote the improvement of church music'.

So far so good. But it was only so far. Still the psalms held sway, and as the years went on and hymns remained a future dream, many attempts were made to make the psalms more equal to their task as the main vehicle of the New Testament church's praise. One way was to get people at least to sing the music with conviction, and at the beginning of printed psalm books it became the custom to include almost a A-level course in how to read and sing music. Again, to bring some life to the singing, psalms were divided into six emotional 'characters': Grand, Triumphant, Cheerful, Didactic, Pathetic (meaning reflective of suffering and despair), and Mournful. It also printed the psalms for 'expressive singing', using italics and capitals designating respectively soft and subdued, and loud and full singing. On the page it would look like:

Mine eyes upon the Lord continually are set;
FOR HE IT IS THAT SHALL BRING FORTH
MY FEET FROM OUT THE NET.

Turn unto me thy face, and to me mercy show;
Because that lam desolate, and am brought very low.

Not a bad idea, I suppose, and maybe it made a difference to the singing.

This was later,¹ but at Bruce's birth already a new song was preparing to rise from the church. The Reformers, to combat the doubtful doctrines and practices which the church had invented, which sullied, as they saw it, the gospel, distrusted all except what was in God's Word, and thus the psalms. But there was much else in God's word than this ancient song book, both in the Old Testament and, more particularly, in the New Testament of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Many of these had the feel of the song about them. So, in 1745 a collection of *Translations and Paraphrases in Verse of Several Passages of Sacred Scripture* was brought to the General Assembly. Maybe it was the political upheavals of the times, or maybe the reluctance to embrace something new, but at first copies were simply made available but not officially recommended. It was not until 1781 that an expanded version of this was sent for trial throughout the Church, and even though this was never authorised as, say, were the

¹ I don't know when these practices became common; the examples I quote come from a century later, but it is likely that they developed over a period.

later hymnaries, it gradually came into use. However, it was a step too far for some and a considerable proportion of the Corstorphine (Edinburgh) membership, decrying 'prelatic leanings', left to form their own congregation!

What was the driving force that broke through the curtain of psalms to sing of the good news of Christ? I suggest that it was nothing less than the faith of the weavers. In our scripture reading there is a beautiful account of how the different crafts and artists brought their offering to the worship of God, not in money but in precisely the form of their daily lives and work: tanners and silversmiths and woodcarvers, designers, engravers, seamsters, embroiderers. And then at the end of the list, there is 'and the weavers'. And the *weavers*. There from the beginning. Might it not have been that as the people of these Scottish communities used their minds and their skills, as day to day they encountered hardship, as they shared what they had and showed compassion, as they sorrowed over loss, and found in Christ reserves of strength and love to bring victory out of defeat, the eternal out of the ephemeral and the transient, they wished this experience, and this faith, to be the coin and currency of their worship. In such a community Bruce was formed, and in such a family, for there is ample evidence of that interest in learning, of examples of compassion for neighbours, of skill aplenty.

But think too of the nature of the weaver's work. Where another craft

might make in the studio and bring forth what was made, the weaver received from their neighbour their own wool, their own yam, and made it into cloth and offered it back. So the creature receives from the Creator skills of heart and hand, a community in which to flourish, love to share, and offers these back in worship and in life. No doubt all of these factors, of mind and heart and hand, fed into the poet's gospel sonnets, and who knows - perhaps the rhythm of the shuttle was in his lines.

It is not unlikely that Bruce's notable contribution to the paraphrases were first offered to his own people. It had become the custom to avoid singing actual psalms in choir practice so that the sacred words be not demeaned by being used to get the notes right. They ranged from the pious to the scurrilous. They might help people remember how the tune went, like - if one is allowed to sing in the pulpit (for all I know Dr Morrison picks up his guitar week by week) -

Come, let us sing the tune of French,
the second measure low;
the third ascendeth very high,
the fourth doth downward go.

Some are more likely to have been sung on the way home from choir practice, like:

O mither dear, Tod Lowrie's lum
Whan seepit will it be.
For a' the soot's come tumblin doon

And spilet ma grannie's tea.

Some were pious doggerel:

Few are thy days, and fall of woe,

O man of woman born!

Thy doom is written, 'Dust thou art,

And shalt to dust return.'

It is known that Bruce was asked to write for tune practices. Perhaps the paraphrases of parts of them found their first use there. They are far from doggerel, and we are talking about those he wrote outright and those he edited and improved. Some of these paraphrases, such as 'O God of Bethel' with its couplet, 'Through each perplexing path of life / our wand'ring footsteps guide' (from Genesis), have touched the communal nerve and still appear with regularity in new hymn collections all over the world. One of his NT paraphrases, no. 58, 'Where high the heavenly temple stands', is a rare hymn about the Christ who at the throne prays in compassion for the world of which he has been a part, (quote) a 'fellow-sufferer (who) retains a fellow-feeling of our pains'. Surely the topography of the place of his birth too are glimpsed in his lines, the 'scattered villages' prolonging the cheerful notes of praise as in the Para.23 we have just sung, or in no. 18 which we sing later the mountain of the Lord rising above the village which 'draws' the wondering eyes, 'draws' - the word Bruce puts in place of the less poetic 'strikes'. And surely, he was attracted to that Proverbs passage on the advantages of learning which is behind

Para. 11 with which we began from the value placed on this in his family and by himself, even though he never himself attained to the crown of glory upon the hoary head of which he evocatively writes in verse 4.

Yet the crown of glory was undoubtedly his also, youthful though he was, for a life spent as an offering to the Lord, in the tradition of the earlier writers of the place, and of the craftsmen and the skilful women, of the singers and, yes, of Moses' tanners and the silversmiths and the woodcarvers, the designers, the engravers, the seamsters, the embroiderers - and the weavers.

4. Very Rev Dr David Lunan 6th July 2014

Psalm 19 vv. 1,2: The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day, they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge.

v.7 The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple.

v. 14 May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord my strength, and my redeemer.

I am grateful to the Michael Bruce Trust for inviting me to preach today in commemoration of the young man who came to be known as 'the gentle poet of Loch Leven'. Today is actually the day after the date of his death in 1767, at the early age of just 21.

Remarkable to think that a man of such tender years should in his short life leave such an impression that his name is still spoken of with affection and admiration 250 years after his death.

The invitation from the Trust through the Rev Angus Morrison, came with a book by way of introduction to Michael Bruce, as I confess I did not know this man of letters, this man of Loch Leven, this man of God.

You will be much more familiar with Bruce than I am, but let me offer just a thumbnail sketch of his life. He was born in Kinneswood - where there is still a museum to his memory - just a week before the Battle of Culloden. In the 21 years of his life he was a contemporary of household names like Captain Cook, James Watt, George Whitfield, William Wordsworth, Thomas Telford, General Wade, Bach, Haydn and Mozart, Goethe, Voltaire, Marie Antoinette, and Robert Burns; who must have read some of Bruce's poems because he borrows ideas, phrases and even lines, in poems as diverse as 'Scots Wha' Hae' and 'The Cotter's Saturday Night.'

Bruce's own home life was probably as close as any family to Burns' beautiful if romantic description of Scottish piety. He was brought up the fifth of eight children, of whom only three lived to adulthood, his father was a weaver. He grew, like our Lord, in stature and in wisdom, in favour with God and with man. He did not enjoy the best of health, but he still took his turn with the cattle and shepherding on the slopes of the Lomonds. He was everyone's favourite, was recognised as 'a lad o' pairts' by the local dominie, who prepared him for matriculation at Edinburgh University at the age of 16, thanks to a legacy his family received. He read Latin, Greek, Metaphysics, Moral and Natural Philosophy and Literature, but he never graduated, which was not uncommon in those days. Nevertheless, he had a better classical education than 99% of today's graduates.

Raised in a devout Christian family, his father was one of the earliest members of the Seceder Church, whose founder, the Rev Ebenezer Erskine was at one time the minister of Portmoak Church. There is a

statue to him in Stirling, on the road up to the castle. Michael Bruce attended for a short time the Seceder Seminary, but he never in fact became a minister. At the age of 21 he was appointed at Forest Mill near Alloa. By this time his health was cause for concern, and he missed home, and these familiar, beautiful surroundings of Loch Leven. He died on the 6th July, nine years before America in 1776 declared its independence from the crown; in the year Mozart at the age of eleven composed his sixth symphony. His biographer the Rev Edward Vernon wrote;

‘On the 5th July 1767, a little more than 21 years old, his gifts still far from fruition, Michael Bruce, talented, esteemed, and greatly beloved, passed to the paradise of his dreams.’

I chose for my reading this evening Psalm 19; a psalm that would have been read, and studied, and probably memorised by Michael Bruce. At that time only Psalms would have been sung in worship in most Scottish churches, but Bruce was among the first and second generation of those who, like Isaac Watts, paraphrased passages of scripture to be sung at public worship, paraphrases which we are singing tonight, and which have been at the heart of worship for centuries in Scotland, and therefore throughout the world.

‘Behold the mountain of the Lord.’

‘O God of Bethel’

‘Now Lord according to thy word’ ...

Psalm 19 is itself a hymn of praise to God, and it is in two separate but connected parts. The first is in praise of God the Creator.

‘How clearly the sky reveals God’s glory The heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies proclaim the work of his hands!’

And the second is in praise of God’s law, God’s guidance, God’s word

‘The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul.’

Bruce wrote poems about creation, and he wrote sacred songs about scripture, ‘gospel sonnets’ as his father called them

Here are opening lines of his ‘Ode to the Sun.’

‘O thou beams the sea-girt earth arrays,
King of the sky, and Father of the Day,
O Sun! what fountain hid from mortal eyes,
Supplies thy circles round the radiant skies
For ever burning and forever bright
With Heaven’s pure fire, and everlasting light!’

Creation tells us something about our Creator, and our appreciation of nature is the first step towards our appreciation of its Creator, a hint, an echo of gratitude for the beauty, the order, the variety, the diversity, and the bounty, directing us towards the goodness of the one who is forever creating and renewing life.

St Paul writes to the Romans that we really have no excuse for our godless ways ‘For since the beginning of the world God’s invisible qualities - his eternal power and divine nature - have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.’

Of course we acknowledge the fallenness of creation, of nature and human nature. Mountains take lives, rivers run dry, famine stalks the earth, everything decays, sorrow comes to us all.

People can be cruel and blind and greedy, even people of faith can be judgemental and unforgiving, covetous and self-centred.

We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.

But creation still has God’s blessing, what God made and looked at was good, seedtime and harvest are promised.

As a man in his hospital bed once said to me. ‘It is a beautiful world, if only we could see it,’

If only we could see it. Michael Bruce could see it.

Our Lord used nature in his parables constantly; the lilies of the field, the sheep of the pastures, the sower and the seed, the fish in the sea, the clouds in the sky. God makes the sun to shine and the rain to fall on the just and the unjust alike. God loves this world of his creating, so much that he sent his Son to us; to tell that he loves us too.

St Francis said over 800 years ago, 'Creation is God's first Bible.'
All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord; if only we could see it.

The heavens declare the glory of God, the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech, night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard.

Michael Bruce as a poet helps us to see again the beauty of nature, pointing to the beauty of holiness.
The poet's task is to help us to see things differently, to stop, to stare, to wonder, to appreciate, to worship.

He wrote

'Now is the time for those who wisdom love
Who love to walk in Virtue's flowery road,
Along the lovely paths of spring to rove,
And follow Nature up to Nature's God.'

We know we need a healthy, saving relationship with Nature's God; we are also realising we need a healthy, saving relationship with Nature itself, with this God-given earth, with this life that is God's gift to each of us, handcrafted, unique, every last human on earth being created in his own image.

All heaven declares the glory of the risen Lord; if only we could see it.

But our creation is not enough. Nature red in tooth and claw, in the garden, always the thorn. The lamb frolicking in the field, so soon led to slaughter.

Our creation is not enough, we need a Redeemer.

And this too, God in his love for the world, offers us freely in Jesus Christ.

The second part of Psalm 19 is in praise of the law.

Michael Bruce would be well versed in the scriptures. He knew the Psalm, and like the psalmist, he knew the laws of God, as well as he

knew the laws of nature. He knew God, and he knew himself. Like Psalmist he knew he not only had wilful sins, but hidden sins. Like St Paul, he knew the value of the law, but he also knew the limitations of the law; we need grace.

He knew that Christ had done for him what the law could never do. He discovered the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, by which alone we are saved, made whole, healed, made complete. He saw God, not just in nature, not just in scripture, but in the face of Christ. We do not understand Christianity until we understand grace.

In the words of the second century theologian and martyr, Irenaeus, 'Jesus is everything God understands as human, Jesus is everything humanity understands as God.'

Christ comes to tell us the Kingdom of God is at hand, the Kingdom of God is creation healed. The Kingdom of God is when we are in the right relationship with God, and in the right relationship with all our neighbours.

The link between the two parts of the psalm is that both nature and the law are the source of life - and that is what Christ brings, life abundant and life eternal, more life than we ever had before. Again Irenaeus, 'The glory of God is a human being fully alive.'

We remember Michael Bruce not just because of his poetry, his way with words, his insights into life, love, beauty, the classics, nature; nor even because of the tragic shortness of his life; but because of his faith. And we today are blessed because he used all his gifts to the glory of God. He has left us words and phrases that have influenced and nurtured our Christian lives; they are embedded in our psyche and in our soul. None of his gifts was squandered, his life was dedicated to his Master.

He came to faith early, and his faith was matured by study and suffering. He was a saint, a saint in the true sense, a follower of Jesus, someone who reveals something of Christ's grace and truth and love, someone who reflects the light of Christ, someone through whom we catch a glimpse of our Lord.

We give thanks to God for a man who embodied the gospel, in whose flesh the Word came alive; and whose words point to the living Word, even Jesus Christ our Lord.

It is not ours to judge, but I believe that for Michael Bruce, the words of his mouth, and the meditations of his heart were pleasing to God, his strength and redeemer, and acceptable in his sight.

By the grace of God, may the same be true of each one of us.

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen

5. Very Rev Professor Iain Torrance 5th July 2015

Michael Bruce of Portmoak.

4

I'd like to begin by giving a sense of the geographical context for Michael Bruce's work and I've gone back to the account of the Parish of Portmoak in the First Statistical Account of 1791-99. The report on the parish was written by the Reverend Andrew Grant, who was minister from 1784-1802.

The parish, he reported, was 6404 acres Scotch, of which 4054 were arable, 300 meadow, 1400 hill. There were about 50 ploughs in the parish, of which 4 were of the smaller English kind. Of the larger ploughs, some were drawn by 2 horses and 4 oxen, some by 2 of each, and a few by 2 horses only. Turnip and grass seed were only just beginning to make their way into the parish and hardly a farm practised regular rotation of crops. So it was relatively poor and ineffective. The main crops were wheat, barley, oats, peas and flax, the flax being grown only for private use.

There were some 240 horses in the parish, many being small and ill-kept. There were about 1290 black cattle and 1384 white-faced sheep.

In terms of prices, a chicken was sold for between 10d and 1 shilling; a duck for 6d and eggs were 3d a dozen.

A ploughman might annually receive £6 and a female servant £2 10s. The population in 1783 was 1040, that being 488 men and 552 women.

In terms of industry there were 50 weavers, 9 shoemakers, 5 smiths, 8 masons, 12 tailors, 1 miller, 2 parchment makers, 8 wrights, 2 coopers, 1 baker.

The minister noted that those attending the established Church were 561, and that in addition there were 373 Burghers, 89 Antiburghers and 17 Cameronians.

In 1791 the population was 1105, with 657 attending the established Church of Scotland and 448 Seceders.

He noted that the Secession from the Established Church had had considerable effect, had initially been a cause of injury and abuse, keeping people separated, but that this settled down. By the 1790s there was harmony and peace.

The stipend of the minister was £50 with 4 chalders of grain. The glebe was about 13 acres. The salary of the parish schoolmaster was about £22.

It is worth thinking for a moment about these figures. Following an article 2 weeks ago in the Financial Times, if you rank the whole population in bands of 1% (so that the poorest 1% is the bottom band, the next poorest 1% in the 2nd band, and so on) you have a ranking of net income percentiles. Today in Britain, to get into the 90th percentile you need a net income of £47,300 and to get into the 10th percentile you need a net income of £12,400 and this gives a ratio of 3.8.

A ratio of 3.8 is utterly different from what you would have had at the end of the 18th Century. The ratio of ploughman to minister was 8.3. Britain today is unimaginably more equal than it was, and conversely, a ploughman at the time of Michael Bruce, even though a skilled worker, was quite unimaginably poor – his annual salary having the purchasing power of the cost of 120—140 chickens.

This in turn provides some insight into the sacrifices made by Michael Bruce's parents and the unremittingly limited circumstances in which he found himself, and yet he could produce verse of such quality and sophistication.

I want to turn now to the religious context of Michael Bruce.

As I'd expect everyone in this congregation to know, there was a sense in which the Reformation began with Luther's re-discovery of a gracious God through reading the Epistle to the Romans. He had an overwhelming sense of the love of God and of the freedom of God's grace to all believers.

Of course that posed many new challenges. There was a new desire to read the scriptures in the language of the people. There was a challenge to the authority of Church officials exclusively to interpret text, and there was a challenge to the intrinsic spiritual status of the church hierarchy. Luther famously claimed that baptism conferred a standing in Christ as important as that of an archbishop or Pope.

This sense of the free availability of God's grace in Christ motivated Patrick Hamilton, Scotland's first Reformation martyr in 1528, and that same urgency was encapsulated in the Scots Confession of 1560.

The Scots Confession is a remarkable document which is genuinely focused upon the mediatorial role of Christ. Jesus Christ is the central object of election. It is Jesus who is the chosen, the elect of God, and we are elected as we are incorporated into him. He is our righteousness. God clothes us, stained as we are with many sins, with the righteousness of his Son.

That instinct and the confidence which sprang from it had the power to effect enormous change. And this instinct remained as a motivating force in the churches of the Reformation though by the year 1700, as you might expect, complications had sprung up which threatened to stifle it.

The Westminster Confession of 1646 was the product of the Westminster Assembly and emerged from a milieu of Puritanism and second-generation Calvinism. While it has many strengths, it initiated a distinctive ‘system of doctrine’ and it began deductively with an abstract understanding of God.

What does this mean? The Scots Confession begins with the lively, active, interventional Hebraic God of the Old Testament, the God who rebuked Cain for the murder of his brother, who addressed Moses from the burning bush, who plead with his people in Isaiah and who drew near to us in Jesus.

The Westminster Confession begins differently and with an abstract or non-Biblical definition of God, the philosophical notion that God is all-knowing and all-powerful. If God is all-knowing, of course, God knows the future and the ultimate destination of each one of us. And indeed God knows eternally what each one of us will do at any point. That opened up or constructed a question of predestination, and inevitably some persons were predestined to go to heaven and some were predestined to hell. And the Westminster Confession by creating a ‘correct’ framework for putting doctrines together, also implied a ‘correct’ a system for reading Scripture. And we still struggle with this today.

By the time you get to the beginning of the eighteenth century there were several competing strands in Scottish theology and church life as official ‘Westminster’ or ‘hyper-Calvinist’ perspectives centred on the absolute sovereignty of God were sometimes questioned and challenged by other forces which capitalised on an understanding of God’s infinite love.

A volume called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* was originally published in England in 1645 and 1649. It reflected the struggle of these debates in England in the seventeenth century and at one point the book contained a dialogue between the characters Evangelista (a minister of the Gospel), Nomista (a legalist), Antinomista (an antinomian), and Neophitus (a young Christian). The book was long lost from sight but was rediscovered by Thomas Boston, a Church of

Scotland minister, and republished in 1718, provoking the immense wrath of James Hadow, the Principal of St Mary's College, St Andrews.

A group of non-Westminster ministers defended the book and became known as 'The Marrow Men'. These included Thomas Boston and the brothers Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine. They should really be understood as first-generation rather than second-generation Calvinists and they were more evangelical and less legalistic than their colleagues. And of course, Ebenezer Erskine was minister of Portmoak from 1703 to 1731.

Ebenezer Erskine was in the thick of the debate. Using the analogy of a will when someone dies, in 1724 he wrote, 'There is a deed or Grant of Christ made to sinners in the free Offer and Call of the Gospel none have reason to say, The Call and Offer is not to me, I am not warranted to embrace Christ ... We have God's commission to preach this Gospel, and to make offer of this Christ to *every creature* sprung of *Adam* ...'.

Although it was a technical debate, from hindsight we may see that at the heart of it all there was a contest between different understandings of God. There was the Westminster Confession's abstract understanding of God as the Omnipotent Lawgiver and Judge and on the other side there was the Trinitarian understanding that the God we encounter in Jesus is God as God truly is. It was a debate which was linked to the beginning of the Church's foreign missions because evidently, if you are committed to a predestined and limited number of the elect, preaching to the heathen is an unpromising task.

The Marrow Men fell out with their presbyteries and with the General Assembly over the issue of patronage in the Church. The consequences of that disagreement were enormous. In December 1733 Ebenezer Erskine joined with William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff and James Fisher at Gairney Bridge, south of Kinross, to form the Associate Presbytery. Ralph Erskine was an observer as was Thomas Mair who subsequently became minister of the Seceding

Church at Orwell, where the poet Michael Bruce's father was an elder.

Throughout the rather arid eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it was through the communion seasons, and teaching about the infinite love of God and nature of God's mercy that the spiritual life of the Church was maintained. Eventually the pendulum swung and there was a reaction against the legalistic sermonising of the Westminster Calvinists in favour of a direct proclamation of the Gospel and its practical application to sinners.

Often overlooked but of enormous importance were the new service books that were produced, new translations of the Psalms and the newly composed Paraphrases. In 1745, a year before Michael Bruce's birth, the General Assembly sent down to presbyteries a collection of paraphrases which quickly went through several editions. And we know how Michael Bruce, young though he was, added significantly to this stock and improved those already drafted. Since the Reformation, the singing of Psalms had ended with the Doxology. Though these Trinitarian ascriptions of glory and praise to Father, Son and Holy Spirit were disputed as being Papist and ritualistic during the Westminster period, they were vehemently defended by David Calderwood who said in 1645, 'Moderator, I entreat that the Doxology be not laid aside for I hope to sing it in heaven'. Doxological worship, that is worship that gave glory and thanks to God, safeguarded an understanding of God as a vibrant tri-unity of love, surging within itself and flowing over to others, and it kept at bay the hyper-Calvinist understanding of God as an abstract and all-knowing judge.

All this give us a sense of the spiritual context out of which Michael Bruce wrote.

Though he died when he was very young, Michael Bruce was an artist and he embraced a number of artistic conventions. His use of classical names, like Agricola, is clear enough, but there were other structures which he embraced. Here I turn to a very recent book by Professor

John Morrison of the University of Aberdeen, entitled *Painting Labour in Scotland and Europe, 1850-1900*².

In the nineteenth century Scotland experienced the most rapid urban growth of anywhere in Europe. And this began in the eighteenth century. In 1755 the population of Edinburgh and Leith was 57,195. By 1791 it was 81,865 and by 1811 it was 103,143. The New Lanark cotton mills were founded in 1786. Yet, nineteenth century Scottish artists painted images of *rural labour*, not the new labour practices in the workshops which employed the majority of lowland Scots. Scotland, according to Morrison, evolved its own aesthetic to understand its unprecedented social change³. There are eighteenth century labour paintings – of lead mining at Leadhills, painted for Lord Hope in 1780.

In England, Ruskin understood manual labour as being different in kind from factory-based labour. Manual labour had the potential to be ennobling⁴. In 1879, the Church of Scotland founded its monthly magazine *Life & Work*. In an article from a series entitled ‘Occasional Homely Papers to the Working Classes’, the author tried to define *nobility*, insisting that wealth was unimportant and that a true gentleman could be found ‘ploughing, digging or shepherding’⁵. Christ was hailed as a manual worker who produced rural implements. In a Glasgow mission week, mothers in Govan were urged to adopt ‘the demeanour of ploughman’s wives’⁶.

In contrast to France and the Netherlands, which also had rural paintings, those of Scotland were distinctive and emerged from a different tradition, one which John Morrison says ‘defin[ed] the nature of labour in a Protestant country’⁷. Rather than pointing to ‘the unalloyed tragedy of the human condition’, the East Lothian artist Robert MacGregor, for example, painted ‘labour as the God-given lot

² Ashgate, 2014

³ Op.cit. page 17 (here and elsewhere summarizing Morrison)

⁴ Page 36

⁵ Morrison, page 62

⁶ Morrison, page 62

⁷ Morrison, page 65

of mankind'⁸. Morrison suggests that this mid-nineteenth century rural art shows not anger (as in Courbet) or fatalism (as in Millet) but 'a peculiarly Scottish phenomenon, an embodiment of *righteous* labour, of dignity, humility and honour'⁹, in which the Church, as an egalitarian structure, projected a supposedly instinctively democratic Scottish character'¹⁰.

So Morrison suggests that at a time of fundamental social change in the nineteenth century, a sense of continuity was provided by what he called a 'relentless promotion of the superiority of rural society'¹¹. He saw this as a particularly Scottish phenomenon. In neither England nor France did rural life receive such unreserved approval. He suggests that in Scotland, art 'consciously eulogised a society constructed on the basis of family relationships, personal, familial and community responsibilities – precisely those aspects of modern urban living which caused the church anxiety'¹². There is, he says, ubiquitous reference to ploughmen 'when seeking to invoke the nobility of rural life and labour'¹³. In discussing the existence of gentlemen, irrespective of wealth, ploughmen are cited. 'In discussing rural housing, it is the ploughman's house that it mentioned'¹⁴. He tells us that skilled use of the 'light plough' became 'a full-time specialist occupation and the horses and men involved in it became the aristocracy of rural labour'¹⁵.

This aesthetic framing of anxiety about changes in life and working conditions can certainly be pushed back from the nineteenth to the eighteenth century. It is not an accident that Burns' best loved and most compassionate lines – to a mouse – are put into the mouth of a ploughman and refer to the dislocation of one's home. Written in 1785 Burns wrote: 'I'm truly sorry man's dominion / Has broken Nature's social union /'. Burns had a poem in praise of the

⁸ Morrison, page 65

⁹ Morrison, page 65

¹⁰ Morrison, page 70

¹¹ Morrison, page 72

¹² Morrison, page 81

¹³ Morrison, page 90

¹⁴ Morrison, page 90

¹⁵ Morrison, page 91

Ploughman: 'Of a' the trades that I do ken, / Commend me to the ploughman /'.

After all this context I turn to Michael Bruce himself. Near the end of his long poem, 'Lochleven', Michael Bruce had his own ode to the ploughman:

How blest the man who in these peaceful plains,
Ploughs his paternal field; far from the noise,
The care, and bustle of a busy world.
All in the sacred, sweet, sequester'd vale
Of solitude, the secret flowery-path
Of rural life, he dwells; and with him dwell
Peace and Content, twins of the sylvan shade,
And all the graces of the golden age.
Such is Agricola, the wise, the good,
By nature formed for the calm retreat,
The silent path of life. Learn'd, but not fraught
With self-importance, as the starchèd fool;
Who challenges respect by solemn face,
By studied accent, and high-sounding phrase.
Enamoured of the shade, but not morose.
Politeness, rais'd in courts by frigid rules,
With him spontaneous grows. Not books alone,
But man his study, and the better part;
To tread the ways of virtue, and to act
The various scenes of life with God's applause.
Deep in the bottom of this flow'ry vale,
With blooming shallows, and the leafy twine
Of verdant alders fenc'd, his dwelling stands
Complete in rural elegance.

These are remarkable lines and are much more than simply an expression of a love for the countryside. They are a carefully written statement of enduring values in a changing world. My hope is that the long context I have provided allows them to speak more forcefully.

I referred earlier to Michael Bruce's religious context of evangelical rather than legal Calvinism.

In 1738 Charles Wesley wrote his great hymn, And can it be that I should gain / An interest in the Saviour's blood? Today it is usually sung to the tune Sagina which was composed in 1825. The third verse runs:

He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite his grace –
Emptied Himself of all but love,
And bled for Adam's helpless race:
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!
'Tis mercy all, immense and free,
For O my God, it found out me!

I can think of no eight lines which better capture the assurance and spirituality which motivated Michael Bruce. At an early point in his great poem, Lochleven, he wrote:

.....The vales, the vocal hills,
The woods, the waters, and the heart of man
Send out a gen'ral song; 'tis beauty all
To poet's eye and music to his ear

One cannot help wondering if the phrase *'tis beauty all* is an unconscious allusion to Wesley's *'tis mercy all*.

The same deep faith is found in his incomparable paraphrases and in his Gospel Sonnets:

I know the Power in whom I trust,
The arm on which I lean;
He will my Saviour ever be,
Who has my Saviour been.

6. Rev. Alan Reid 3rd July 2016

Psalm 121

“I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth.” (Psalm 121:1, 2)

A few weeks ago, I achieved something that has been on my To Do list since I arrived in Kinross 7 ½ years ago, namely to make the ascent of the Bishop Hill. On one of those sunny Sunday afternoons we enjoyed in May, Christine and I set off up the hill, enjoying the beautiful views and hopefully burning off a few calories in the process. More than once as we paused to catch our breath and to admire the stunning scene before us – the receding rooftops of Kinnesswood, the opening vistas across the Loch and beyond, I thought of the words of the Psalm which was read for us a few minutes ago, a favourite Psalm of many Scots, and I thought of Michael Bruce over whose short life the Bishop Hill loomed large and which he probably ascended himself as a boy, and I got to reflecting on the message of the Psalm, its inspiration in the seemingly enduring nature of the hills and the yet more enduring (indeed eternal) nature of the Lord God's watching over of us and of our coming and going.

So this evening I want to share some of those reflections and something of the message of the Psalm both in its original context in Israel and here in Bishopshire both for Michael Bruce now 250 years ago and for us here today.

The Psalm is strikingly simple in its premise, which is probably why it is so enduringly powerful. As human beings we instinctively look up – we look up to the heavens and marvel at the changing daytime skies and at the star-spangled firmament of night, and we look up to the hills. For most people, the shape of the hills around them is imprinted on their memory, whether they are conscious of it or not. I never fail to be struck by the view of Ben Ledi that I catch sometimes as I cross the Forth Bridge. Its distinctive step gable was the sight I saw walking to school in the morning and it remains in my memory. For me, Dumyat above Stirling and Arthur's seat in Edinburgh, the

Alps across Lake Geneva or Les Dents du Midi from Lausanne where I studied for a time, or the Eildon hills that welcome visitors to Roxburghshire, or the daily sight of Arnton Fell and Caerba Hill above Newcastleton where I lived for nearly 20 years are all imprinted in my mind's eye. Here in Kinross-shire of course, the Bishop, the West Lomond, Benarty, the Cleish Hills, the Ochils – we catch sight of them from different angles, from near or from far away and they speak of home; their names are taken for the High School houses Benarty, Lomond and Ochil, as they were also in Dunblane where I was raised – Ledi, Lomond, Vorlich and Venue. We lift our eyes to the hills, instinctively, and for the Psalmist and the other pilgrims approaching Jerusalem, it would doubtless have been the same. But the hills beckon us higher and further. The Dunblane High School motto is *ultra prospice montes*,

look beyond the hills, and this Psalm encourages us to do something very similar, not to be content with the enduring and comfortable familiarity of the hills of home, but to be reminded that it is not in the hills that our help is to be found, but in the Lord who created them. That is the message of the Psalm to which we need to take heed.

Perhaps we are less used in our time to the shaking of certainties than our forebears were – how thankfully rare a thing it is in our day for illness to take a child or a young adult, whereas not so very long ago in the great scheme of things, death came untimely to many families. It is almost inconceivable to us that a talent like that of Michael Bruce's should have blossomed and wilted all before the age of 22.

But the fleeting nature of life was right up there in his writings. In a letter to his friend David Pearson just a few months before his death, Bruce wrote: “I met the other day a drunken fool who grovelling lay upon the common road and raved at 'Lady Fortune' in good terms - in good set terms, and yet a very fool. I helped him up. 'I thank you, sir,' quoth he, and then he drew a dial from his pouch and gazing on it with unsteadfast eye, said very wisely, 'It is ten o'clock. Thus may we see,' quoth he, 'how the world wags. 'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine, and in another hour 'twill be eleven, and so from hour to hour

we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour we rot and rot, and thereby hangs a tale.'

As Bruce gazed out from Kinnesswood or perhaps from higher up the hill at Loch Leven even he could not have imagined, I'm sure, the change that would half a century later come upon the landscape with the cutting of the channel to lower the loch and the consequent draining of the marshland to create today's lush farmland.

But what Bruce did *get* (and how!) was that there was more to life than a fleeting span; something far more enduring than the apparently ageless landscape. The mountain of the Lord that would draw the wondering eyes was something much more than the hills that greeted the pilgrims on their approach to the holy city, something much more than Zion itself on which the holy Temple stood, the Light of the World – Jesus the Son of God – who brings life in all its fulness and the promise of life eternal.

The Bishop Hill watches over us, a benign presence, a reassuring and enduring certainty in the lives not only of those of you who live on this side of the Loch but of the whole population of the county, it cannot actually offer us anything beyond the emotional comfort of its abiding presence. 'Where does my help comes from?' asks the Psalmist rhetorically, and he answers his own question with a repeated refrain that I have to confess had never struck me until I turned up the Psalm and looked closely at it following that walk we took in May. Five times in the eight verses of the Psalm he drives home his point, that the Lord who made heaven and earth watches over us. Once it says that He watches over Israel, but on the other four occasions the personal pronoun is singular – He watches over *you* (and you and you and you) – the Lord who watches over *you* will not slumber; He will watch over *your* life; He will watch over *your* coming and going both now and for evermore.

I've no doubt that Michael Bruce enjoyed the views of Bishopshire – lifting his eyes to the hills, and looking down from the hills – he wrote:

“Fair from his hand behold the village rise
In rural pride, 'mong intermingled trees ;
Above whose aged tops the joyful swains
At eventide descending from the hill, [*he was one of those swains*]
With eye enamour'd, mark the many wreaths
Of pillar'd smoke high curling to the clouds,
How fair a prospect rises to the eye,
Where Beauty vies in all her vernal forms
For ever pleasant and for ever new.”

But he also came to know that, steadfast, unchanging and beautiful though his earthly surroundings were, there was yet greater steadfastness and beauty to be known in the Lord who though He was the Maker of heaven and earth, is also the One who watches over each of us as if we each were the only one there was to care for and who cares for us not only in the fleeting time of this earthly life but for all eternity, where high the heavenly temple stands and where our great High Priest – Jesus – not only wears our nature and partakes our name, but watches over our coming and going both now and for evermore.

I lift up my eyes to the hills – where does my help come from?
My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.
He will not let your foot slip – He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

The LORD watches over you – the LORD is your shade at your right hand; the sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.
The LORD will keep you from all harm – He will watch over your life; the LORD will watch over your coming and going both now and for evermore.

7. Rev. Douglas O. Nicol 2nd July 2017

I'm delighted to be with you this evening in Portmoak Church for our Commemoration of the life and work of Michael Bruce – though I recognise that there are certain dangers in being a guest speaker!

My mind goes back to an occasion when I accepted an invitation to speak at a charity event in the Scottish Borders. I thought all had gone well, and within days I received a ‘thank-you’ note with a cheque to cover expenses. I had no wish to accept the money, so I wrote back to return the cheque ... asking that the money be put to a good cause. This was duly acknowledged – with the letter reading along the lines: ‘Thank you so much for returning the cheque ... we are putting in into our bank so that we can afford a better speaker next year’!

For our thoughts this evening I have taken some verses from the teaching of Jesus contained in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, and in particular the final verse of our reading: *‘So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself’*.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus sets out for humanity a standard of discipleship not based on a set of rules, but rather on an inner revolution of both attitude and outlook. Everyone, Jesus says, must set their own priorities in life, and those who put God first can be free from worry as they find everything working out in their lives according to His plan. Later in His ministry Jesus was to give the promise of His Holy Spirit to strengthen His disciples in keeping to His way, but in the Sermon on the Mount He simply gave the advice: *‘Consider the lilies of the fields’* – and observe how God looks after them – then trust that He will look after you too.

The poet for whom we give thanks tonight greatly valued the natural world around him – and this is reflected in his work. Born here in Kinnesswood on the 27th March 1746, one of the eight children of weaver Alexander (or Saunders) Bruce and his wife Ann, Michael grew up to be a likeable lad. His school friends spoke warmly of him, and to him learning seemed to come easily.

In pursuing his studies, Michael was fortunate in have Saunders as his father and a Mr. Dun as his schoolmaster. His father was both pious and intelligent, and his kind and generous nature inspired him to help others develop their own knowledge and skill. He was delighted to sense Michael’s eagerness to learn – and he encouraged him fully not

only to attend school, but to learn all that he could from his schoolmaster – one carefully chosen by their Minister, the well-kent Rev. Ebenezer Erskine.

But there was one further influence on the young Michael Bruce – for he had to take his share of both herding and harvest – and such work gave him the chance to observe the natural world in the way encouraged by Jesus in His ‘Sermon on the Mount’. Michael would spend many a sunlit summer day herding sheep on the slopes of the Lomond Hills behind his home, and one biographer, the Rev. Edward Vernon, suggests that ‘this was one of the major formative influences for (Michael’s) future poetic activity’ – herding on the Lomond Hills.

Yesterday it was my privilege to be with you at Michael Bruce’s cottage for a very special afternoon. I enjoyed the music ... and the work of village children in poetry and weaving ... and of course, the cake! But what struck me most was the scenery through which I drove to and from Kinesswood. My experience in the Borders is that it often takes visitors to fully appreciate the scenery around, and I found myself talking of the ‘gentle beauty’ of Kinross-shire – not the dramatic mountains of our Highlands nor the rolling hills of our Scottish Borders where I live – but rather a gentle beauty of loch and hill – with the hills looking so green after recent rain. It is little wonder in my mind that observing and considering all this gentle beauty led in due time to Michael Bruce being described as ‘the gentle poet of Loch Leven’.

From these hills that he loved, Michael moved temporarily in 1762 to Edinburgh where he matriculated as a 16 and a half year old with the intention of becoming a minister of religion. There he was described as warm hearted, broadminded and courageous – with a genuine Christian faith. Edinburgh in the late 18th Century was a melting pot of the ideas perculating through Europe, and along with this stimulation, Michael was greatly encouraged by his Professors, especially Adam Fergusson, who would in due course support the correct publication of Michael’s works.

Leaving University in the Spring of 1765, Michael served as schoolmaster at Gairney Bridge, then for six months studied at the Theological Hall of the Succession Church in Kinross, and then as teacher at Forest Mill. Tragically, a mishap on his way to Forest Mill proved to be catastrophic. We suspect that his pony on that journey was overladen – not only with his personal necessities for life, but also with the many books he would want to have with him. The pony stumbled in the fast flowing waters of the Black Devon, and Michael was thrown into the river. Uninjured, but soaked to his skin, he made his way to his new school, where good folk looked after him.

But the school was in poor condition and gave him little chance of recover from his ordeal. The damage to his health had been done and he was never fully fit again. He returned to Kinnesswood in February 1767 and died, his lungs riddled with consumption, on the 5th July 1767 – a little more than 21 years of age.

But though he died so young, he left for us a collection of wonderful poetry and some inspiring paraphrases – all testimony to his love of the natural world, his sincere Christian faith, and his gift as a wordsmith. Sadly his works were not published in his lifetime, and because of the sinister sequel often called ‘the Logan episode’ we have much less of his work than we might otherwise have had. What we have in our time inherited, however, gives us an inspiring glimpse into the mind and work of a remarkable young man – and for me ‘Elegy written in Spring’, probably his last poem and often regarded as his ‘farewell to life’, and read fully tonight by Professor Munro, sums up Bruce’s love of both human friendship and the fields and plains in which his life was set:

*Farewell, ye blooming fields! Ye cheerful plains!
Enough for me the churchyard’s lonely mound
Where Melancholy with still silence reigns,
And the rank grass waves o’er the cheerless ground.*

*There let me sleep forgotten in the clay,
Where death shall shut these weary aching eyes;*

*Rest in the hopes of an eternal day,
Till the long night's gone, and the last morn arises.*

So the words of Michael Bruce echo to us across the generations, and with them come the eternal messages contained in the Sermon on the Mount. As we tonight commemorate Michael's life, let us be mindful of the inspiration for his work – his Christian faith, expressed in his love of family and friends, and his appreciation through observation of the world of nature around him. And from this inspiration, let us affirm in our time ... and for our lives ... that God created and that God cares.

Firstly then we remind ourselves that God created the world in which our lives are set – He created it in all its wonder ... locally, its 'gentle beauty' in nature ... and its regularity – with night following each day so that our human lives are broken up into manageable proportions, and with season following season to give us the variety of experience that enriches life. And in response to this created order we say:

*Such blessings from thy gracious hand
Our humble pray'rs implore;
And thou shalt be our chosen God,
And portion evermore.*

The God who creates ... and secondly the God who cares.

We sense that Michael Bruce appreciated God's care in his life – even when faced with appalling conditions in the schools in which he taught, or even in the days when he sensed that his death was inevitable – at times like those Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount were very real to him: "*So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself*". But he knew them too in positive times – like when he desperately wanted to go to University and his parents wondered where on earth the money would come from. Then by God's grace his father received an unexpected legacy of 200 merks, and the two pounds, two shillings and two pence were enough

to see him on his way to Edinburgh. *‘So do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself’.*

So in trust it can be for us – as daily we commit our lives into the hands of our creator God. None of us know what the dawning of each new day will bring – of blessing or of sorrow, or hope or of challenge. To each of us the one we commemorate tonight, Michael Bruce, would say: *‘Consider the lilies’* and *‘Do not be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow will look after itself’* – and to these he would add the words we sang earlier:

*Through each perplexing path of life
Our wand’ring footsteps guide;
Give us each day our daily bread,
And raiment fit provide.*

The message for our lives of the one we commemorate tonight – Michael Bruce, the gentle poet of Loch Leven.

8. Very Rev. Professor David Fergusson 1st July 2018

I thank you for your welcome this evening and for the honour of delivering the annual address on Michael Bruce. We live in the Braid Hills on the south of Edinburgh and each morning, weather permitting, I enjoy the view across the Forth to the Lomond Hills of Fife. It’s an uplifting sight as I set out on my bicycle. And I can now associate this daily scene with the poetry of Bruce. So my gratitude is twofold – both for the invitation to come here and the stimulus to learn more about Bruce’s life and work.

The Scottish Reformed tradition has been often been criticised for its hostility to the arts. After the Reformation in the 16th century, buildings were no longer adorned with paintings, sculptures and stained glass. Instead, we had the simplicity of people gathered

around table and pulpit. Ministers wore the black Genevan gown rather than bright vestments. Attention was focussed on the reading and preaching of the Word of God and less on the visual. Music was no longer a performance of the choir but the collective and unaccompanied rendition of the metrical Psalms. Sundays became a day of quiet when nothing much moved – even the reading of newspapers was frowned upon – you might still remember this from your childhood. But this story of suppression of artistic forms is often presented in a one-sided and too negative manner. Though it's been endorsed by many influential writers, It needs to be qualified in two important ways. These may help us to understand why a poet of the quality of Michael Bruce could emerge in rural Scotland in the mid-18th century. The first of these qualifications is that the Reformation instead of merely suppressing artistic instincts produced a love of language and a facility with words. The population of Scotland became literate, eventually with one of the highest literacy rates in Europe. The Bible was translated into English. Every household was expected to hold a copy. The King James Version eventually became established and children became familiar with its phrases and cadences. Congregations learned to absorb long sermons, these often lasting for an hour or more. The metrical psalms were memorized, even by people who could not read. So a commitment to linguistic precision, felicity of expression, and directness of communication characterised Scottish education after the Protestant Reformation.

In addition, to the effect of the older religious tradition we should recognise also the Enlightenment influences that were widespread by the middle of the 18th century. This was a time when the arts and the sciences flourished. Classical culture was studied. Turning from the divisive and violent disputes of the covenanting period, the Scottish clergy engaged in new forms of learning in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences. The scholars of Glasgow and Edinburgh were amongst the leading figures in Europe at a time when these universities outshone Oxford and Cambridge.

Upon matriculating at the University of Edinburgh, Michael Bruce was taught by Adam Ferguson, one of the founding figures of sociology. Ferguson had been a minister in Perthshire and a chaplain to the Black Watch, and he was the only native Gaelic speaker amongst the leading scholars of the Scottish Enlightenment. And then there was Hugh Blair, another of Bruce's teachers. The minister of St Giles and the first ever professor of English literature, Blair was the great preacher of his day. His sermons went through numerous editions in the 19th century and were translated into German. His command of language, his commitment to style, and his enthusiasm for the classics of English literature seem to have rubbed off on Bruce. These teachers took the time to encourage Bruce, a young man from north of the Forth who showed great aptitude and whose creative writing suggested much promise. They took notice of him, and Ferguson recommended his work to a publisher. There is perhaps a moral here for those of us who are teachers.

Both these influences – the Reformed tradition and that of the Enlightenment are combined in Bruce's writing. Consider his paraphrases which are amongst the finest Scottish contributions to the liturgy of the church. These reflect the beauty of the King James version of the Bible, they have an originality of expression which prevents them from becoming predictable or banal in rendering Scripture into verse. Doggerel is avoided and he improves greatly upon the earlier work of other writers. There is also a passion and tenderness in his writing which because it is restrained never lapses into sentimentality or false emotion. Here is one example which I have often commented upon in my lectures on divine providence without ever realising that I was speaking about Michael Bruce. It's from the paraphrase we've just sung. O God of Bethel. Note the fourth verse.

O spread thy cov'ring wings around,
Till all our wand'rings cease.
And at our Father's loved abode,
Our souls arrive in peace.

Here we have a powerful sense of the protective love of God. It's ever present and yet it holds a promise of what is to come. So it conveys a sense of direction and purpose to everything. In evoking these thoughts, Bruce uses a maternal and paternal image to describe God's love. The covering wings are those of a mother bird spread around us. Perhaps there are echoes here of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem and wishing to gather her people as a mother bird her young. And then there is the fatherly image of God's house which awaits us and welcomes us home – resonating now with the end of Psalm 23 or perhaps the prodigal son's return to his father's home when he falls upon the mercy of his parents. All this is evoked within the space of four short lines. These paraphrases remain amongst the riches of our Scottish tradition and it's a pity that they are not more often sung today.

Bruce's verse however goes beyond the Scripturally-based traditions of the Reformed church to which he remained so committed. His poetry celebrates the natural world through a more wide-ranging verse of baroque quality. Again, we need to be reminded that our tradition was never blind to the beauty of nature, as God's handiwork. John Calvin celebrates it in his writing, especially in commenting on the Psalms. He was fascinated both by the motions of the planets, the heavenly bodies, and the intricacy of life forms on our planet. These were part of a grand order. In contemplating God's creation, Calvin was lifted out of his struggles within the church and the poor health that afflicted him for most of his life. In Bruce too, there is a sense of God's grandeur in nature. His writing reveals the close attention he paid to the world around him and his delight in the changing seasons and colours and the myriad life forms he encountered. Here is a late poem. *Elegy Written in Spring*, considered by some to be his finest.

Soon as o'er eastern hills the morning peers,
From her low nest the tufted lark upsprings;
And, cheerful singing, up the air she steers;
Still high she mounts, still loud and sweet she sings.

He is writing from the wood that overlooked the parish church and its graveyard. The springtime is all around him in the fresh growth and activity of birds and lambs. He recalls the earlier spring seasons of his youth, times of happiness and promise. His reference to the great scholars who have studied the natural world reminds us of his academic pursuits in Edinburgh. But then we learn that the poet is now sick and ailing. He described himself. 'Meagre and pale, the ghost of what I was'. He lies against a tree half-exhausted and contemplates the passing time. Not far away is the churchyard where soon he will sleep, as he says 'forgotten in the clay'.

Farewell, ye blooming field! Ye cheerful plains;
Enough for me the churchyard's lonely mound
Where Melancholy with still Silence reigns,
And the rank grass waves o'er the cheerless ground.'

This is work of high quality in one so young. Bruce's life was cut short at the age of 21 before it had even reached its prime. His poetic talents had not yet fully matured and who knows what great work he might have accomplished or of how highly he might have been regarded in the canon of Scottish literature alongside Burns, Scott, Hogg, Stevenson and MacDiarmid.

In John Updike's novel *Toward the End of Time* the ageing narrator is making a slow and painful recovery from cancer surgery. He is suddenly struck by the rhapsody of colours he sees from his bedroom window in the trees, shrubs and landscape all around. He writes this. 'I see now too late that I have not paid the world enough attention – not given it enough credit. The radio, between the weather and the stock report, releases a strain from Schubert's 'Drei Klavierstücke', a melody that keeps repeating, caressing itself in sheer serene joy, and I think of him and Mozart dying young and yet each pouring out masterpieces to the last, rising higher and higher as their lives fall

from them, blessing with their angelic ease the world that has reduced them to misery.’

How strange it is that those who have died young have taught us to pay the world the attention it deserves. As Wallace Stevens once wrote, ‘Death is the mother of beauty.’ There is the music of Schubert and Mozart, the poetry of Keats and Shelley, the painting of Raphael, Van Gogh and Joan Eardley here in Scotland. So too Michael Bruce. Despite his early death, his influence has persisted. He stands as someone who achieved a great deal in a short time, whose faith in God and love of the world were united, whose rootedness in his home community was celebrated and affirmed, whose love of life was simple and instructive, and whose illness and death were faced with courage and without self-pity. All this is a rich testimony to the grace of God within us and in the world around us. So tonight we celebrate who Bruce was and what he did, without thinking of what might have been.

9. Very Rev. Dr Russell Barr 7th July 2019

Scripture: Matthew 6: 25-34

Faith in Poetry

In the spring of 1798, some thirty-one years after the death of Michael Bruce, shepherds and farmers tending their flocks in rural Somerset were occasionally disturbed by itinerant beggars or battle-weary soldiers wandering the lanes or sleeping rough in the woods.

One man whom the farmers saw regularly stood out from all the rest because he would wander along muttering to himself, seemingly oblivious to his surroundings and talking obsessively as he walked.

It was a queer thing one farmer reported.

I've oft thought that his brain was that fu' of stuff that he was forced to be always at it whether or not, wet or fair, mumbling to himself along t'roads

It was a shrewd judgment for the mumblor in question was no less a figure than William Wordsworth spotted in the act of composing one of his poems.

Later that year along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Wordsworth published the *Lyrical Ballads*, one of the seminal works of English literature and the start of the literary period now known as English Romanticism

The Ancient Mariner, Kubla Khan, Frost at Midnight, Tintern Abbey, The Idiot Boy, the Thorn and early passages of The Prelude were composed on these Somerset lanes; the farmer was quite right, Wordsworth brain was indeed *fu' of stuff*.

Although I am sure he would often be seen wandering, whether or not the young Michael Bruce was ever heard muttering to himself and composing a poem as he walked along the lanes and paths around Kinnesswood, the sights and sounds, rhythms and constantly changing landscape of Kinross-shire were clearly a rich source of inspiration for Bruce, sometimes referred to as *the gentle poet of Loch Leven*

Thank you for your welcome this evening and for the honour of delivering this annual address on Michael Bruce.

Having been born and brought up in the Ayrshire town of Kilmarnock, I have long been familiar with the poetry and songs of another 18th century rural Scot, Robert Burns.

Let me confess however I was not familiar with the poetry of Michael Bruce so I am more than grateful for the opportunity this invitation has given me to learn a little about the man, his all too short life, and his poetry.

Faith in Poetry: that is the title I have given this address – and as I hope it is immediately evident the title has at least two possible meanings.

It could mean that we have faith in poetry as one of a number of distinct but related literary forms, that it is an art form in its own right, something to be experienced, celebrated and enjoyed alongside music, painting, sculpture and dance.

Faith in poetry could also be taken to mean that poetry is one of the ways we can articulate and find the right words to express some of the deep things we hold to be true about ourselves, about one another and about the world in which we live and about God.

Would I be right in guessing poetry is not everyone's favourite form of literature?

Do you have awful childhood memories of ploughing through some obscure text or being forced to rote learn a few lines to recite to the class?

Me too!

As the years have passed however – and as I suspect my congregation at Cramond Kirk would confirm – I have turned more and more to poetry as a source of inspiration for my preaching and also to poetic images and rhythms in the preparation of prayers for public worship.

One day perhaps I will come close to the poetic beauty of one of George McLeod's prayers

Holy Spirit, Enlivener,

Breathe on us, fill us with life anew.

In Your new creation, already upon us breaking through,

Groaning and travailing,

But already breaking through

Breathe on us

*Till that day when night and autumn vanish
And lambs grown sheep are no more slaughtered
And even the thorn shall fade*

And the whole earth shall cry Glory at the marriage feast of the Lamb

Faith in poetry – and one of the reasons I have faith in poetry is not because I find poetry always easy to understand – I don't – it can often be difficult, challenging, elusive, even obscure – but for the very reason I don't always find life easy or ministry easy or faith easy or the Bible easy – it too can be difficult, challenging, elusive and even obscure – and more often than not it is poetry which allows me to explore the depth of something, a question, a concern, a doubt and allows me to celebrate the mystery and majesty of God.

At its best poetry explores the depth of human experience – and at its best faith does the same - opening our hearts as well as our minds to the intellectual, emotional and spiritual roots of what it means to be alive and what it means to be human and what it means to live with faith and the nature and character of God.

Have you noticed how much poetry is found in the Bible?

The Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament has many literary forms including poetry

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures, He leadeth me beside the still waters, He restoreth my soul

As well as the Psalms you will find many poetic images and phrases in the struggles of Job with his comforters, in the sometimes erotic imagery of the Song of Songs, in the Wisdom literature and in the Book of Proverbs with its collection of insights into what makes for a good and godly life.

You will also find poetry in the sometimes difficult book of Ecclesiastes where the author Qoheleth - the name means teacher –

coming to the end of his life takes stock of the world as he has experienced it, a world full of contradictions and surprises

To everything there is a season he writes, and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted.

And although he may not always have understood God's presence and purpose in the events and circumstances of his life, Qoheleth is persuaded God has made everything to suit its time, nothing can be added to it, nothing taken from it.

Was Jesus a poet?

Although I don't think Jesus was a poet in any conventional sense I wonder if you would agree Jesus was poetic in the similes and metaphors he used – *the kingdom of God is like* – as well as poetic in the parables he told, parables like the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, parables which leaves the listener or the reader to work something out for themselves.

At its best poetry leaves the listener to work something out, so too does faith, so too does the Bible.

How much time and energy has been expended over the years wondering whether or not the Bible is true?

Of course it is important to uncover the historical veracity of these ancient texts

But it is also important to keep in mind that the deeper purpose of the Bible is to ask us whether or not we are true, as alive and human as God intends us to be.

Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink – is not the life more than meat and the body than raiment?

And why take ye thought for raiment?

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow, they toil not, neither do they spin.

And yet I say unto you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these

Did Michael Bruce have faith in poetry?

We heard Professor Munro reading Bruce's autobiographical poem entitled Alexis

Begin my pipe – a softly mournful strain, a sadly-soothing strain, a melancholy strain.

As evidenced in the music of his pipe – what I imagine to be his flute – clearly Alexis (Bruce) is not a happy man.

And what is the cause of his unhappiness?

Alexis (Bruce) has his eye on a young woman – but sadly she does not appear to have her eye on him.

The feast was spread, the dancing begun – and each for the dance selects the nymph, the girl, he loves.

And every nymph with smiles her swain approves – all it would seem but the girl poor Alexis (Bruce) invited to dance.

Indeed some time later as she sees Alexis (Bruce) hiding in the shade hoping to engage her in conversation, in modern parlance, she does a body swerve and heads off in the opposite direction leaving him distraught.

Notice please there is no mention of God in the poem and in that sense there is nothing overtly religious about 'Alexis'.

Yet given his failing health – Bruce had lived with tuberculosis for several years and died an untimely death on the 05th July 1767, aged 21 years - is it possible to read into the poem something of Bruce's faith and his relationship with God?

He is such a fast God, wrote R S Thomas, always before us and leaving as we arrive.

Might the elusive nature of his would be lover suggest something of the elusive nature of Bruce's faith in God?

And isn't that what faith in poetry does, as with Michael Bruce, the gentle poet of Loch Leven, whose life, whose poetry and whose continuing influence we celebrate this evening, it leaves you wondering and it leaves you pondering on what the Bible poetically described as the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.

10. Very Rev. Dr Angus Morrison 3rd July 2022

'The "Gentle Poet" and our Ecological Crisis'

Reading: Romans 8: 18-25

Thank you for your kind welcome and for the invitation to give the address at this year's Michael Bruce Service of Commemoration. These annual services were for me very special occasions throughout my ministry here. It is good that the addresses given at these services are on the Trust's website for all to read and enjoy.

My aim this evening is to come at Michael Bruce from a slightly different angle. We meet in the wake of two occurrences which have called global attention to already existing concerns about humanity's relationship to the natural world. First, there was the coronavirus pandemic. The second, more positive, event was the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26), held in Glasgow last November. Both have highlighted the fact that we face a serious global ecological

crisis, in which the role of human beings has proved of decisive significance.¹⁶

What has brought about this, frankly, dangerous situation? That would be an evening's talk in its own right but we must briefly mention two significant movements in the Western world during the last 200-300 years, movements which delivered important benefits, but which can also be seen to have had a seriously detrimental effect on our relationship to the natural world.

Firstly, the game-changing 18th century Enlightenment had a deeply anthropocentric view of reality. It held that human liberation and fulfilment come about through our domination of nature. Subsequent developments in science and technology made available the tools needed to attain this goal.¹⁷

The second, more recent, movement is the one we know as postmodernity. Where the Enlightenment poured scorn on religion as irrational superstition, postmodernity valued religion and the recovery of spirituality. It has, however, failed to offer any firmer foundation for respect for nature and for valuing it for its own sake. In postmodernity, such respect turns out to be purely a matter of convention or convenience. And so, welcome to the global environmental crisis, due in large part to wilful human irresponsibility.¹⁸

The current ecological crisis, as many increasingly recognize, is at core a moral and spiritual issue. The most pressing need is to find an adequate foundation for according to nature the respect and care that it deserves. Distinguished public intellectuals, like Roger Gottlieb,

¹⁶ Among notable indicators of the current crisis are forest loss and land degradation, the pollution and warming of oceans, the melting of the ice cap, accelerating loss of species and the devastation of natural habitats, increasing the likely incidence of so-called zoonotic diseases, like the coronavirus, which cross from animals to humans.

¹⁷ As the Oxford scientist-theologian Alister McGrath put it: 'The roots of our ecological crisis lies in the rise of a self-centred view of reality that has come into the possession of the hardware it needs to achieve its goals.' Alister McGrath, *The Re-enchantment of Nature, Science, Religion and the Human Sense of Wonder* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2002), p. 54.

¹⁸ For further reflection on the impact of the two movements referred to, see, in particular, McGrath (2002), pp. 53-76.

have recently been giving attention to this issue, recognizing its fundamental importance for the way in which we address current environmental challenges.¹⁹

Reading through his work recently, it struck me that Michael Bruce has a potentially useful contribution to make here. I wish to explore some aspects of that, but we must first briefly situate Bruce within the long and rich tradition of Christian reflection on creation or the natural world.

The church, it is true, has not always lived up to what is best in its reflective traditions. At times the spiritual dimension of reality has been privileged over the material, sadly resulting in the church's collusion with secular agendas of environmental exploitation. 'Enlightenment' attitudes were 'Christianized'. The loving 'dominion' to which humans are called, on the Creator's behalf (Genesis 1: 26, 28), has too often been exchanged for a ruthless domination which lacks all biblical justification.²⁰

Those who espouse this mind-set regularly approach the Bible as a book which is essentially about the salvation of individual human 'souls', involving their ultimate rescue from the physical and material world to find a purely spiritual, disembodied eternal existence, somewhere 'away beyond the blue', as reflected in many popular hymns. What is frequently overlooked is that this understanding owes more to Plato than to Scripture.

Interestingly, although some strands of the Reformed tradition, in which Bruce stood, have at times yielded to these notions, John Calvin himself did not. To the surprise of some, there are incredibly

¹⁹ See, for example, Roger Gottlieb, *Morality and the Environmental Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), especially pp. 3-28.

²⁰ There is evidence that the contemporary church, in recent years, has been making progress in taking seriously its ecological responsibilities. For example, both the Church of Scotland and the Church of England have adopted creation care as one of the five marks of mission, alongside evangelism and the nurturing of those who have been baptised. The fifth mark affirms a commitment 'to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth'. The success of Eco Congregation Scotland is an encouraging indication that the issue is being taken seriously at a grass-roots level.

valuable ecological resources within Reformation thought.²¹ Calvin well understood the full biblical scope of God's loving purposes for the cosmos. Creation is inherently good and to be valued as such.²² Made in God's image, human beings were intended to be God's humble vice-regents, caring about and caring for creation. The tragedy of human self-deification and failure in their calling has gravely impacted the natural world. As Paul says, the whole creation is groaning.²³

The most penetrating of Christian exegetes and theologians have also recognized the all-embracing nature of redemption in the Bible, whose vision is of the whole created order sharing one day in the liberation and glory of God's children in a wonderfully renewed and healed cosmos. Our Pauline reading encapsulates this. If the earth, then, is the Lord's and he so deeply loves it that he plans its full redemption, then we should love and care for it too. Here indeed are rich resources on which it would be wise to draw in addressing the current crisis.

Michael Bruce, of course, not only predates the ecological concerns of our time, he died just as the Industrial Revolution was beginning to get underway in Britain. This would prompt the powerful reaction of the great Romantic poets - Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, et cetera - who lamented the dis-enchantment of the natural world which the Industrial Revolution represented. Wordsworth's environmental advocacy, for example, was impassioned and lifelong. Notable precursors of these poets – among them, James Thomson (1700-48)

²¹ See, for example, Belden Lane, *Ravished by Beauty. The Surprising Legacy of Reformed Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Lane acknowledges that John Calvin is 'a figure not generally associated with beauty, desire or the earth' (p. 2) Recognizing, however, that 'even Calvin had refused to define the human person exclusively in terms of sin,' he writes, 'The human soul is turned back on itself, twisted by selfishness; nonetheless, God's image remains apparent. Creation, therefore, needs to be revitalized, not destroyed. The first thing to be said about us is not our monstrous distortion of God's image, but our reflection of its glory. Sin may be an "infection" of our being, but not the "essence" of who we are' (p. 9).

²² There is no doubt that the Lord would have us uninterruptedly occupied in this holy meditation; that, while we contemplate in all creatures, as in mirrors, the immense riches of his wisdom, justice, goodness, and power, we should not merely run over them cursorily, and, so to speak, with a fleeting glance; but we should ponder them at length, turn them over in our minds seriously, and faithfully, and recollect them repeatedly.' John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.xiv.21. The Library of Christian Classics vol. xx, Ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), p. 180.

²³ Romans 8: 22.

and Thomas Gray (1716-71) - did, however, strongly influence the young Bruce.²⁴ Incidentally, more than once Bruce speaks of the health-giving effects of our engagement with the world of nature. Privileged, as most of us here have been, to live in the same beautiful environment as he, we were able to discover in a new way, during lockdown, the truth of his observations.

The theme of creation is absolutely foundational for a Christian approach to the environment. For Bruce, as for John Calvin, the world was loved into being by the triune God of love. Like Calvin, who spoke of himself as being 'ravished' with the wonders of the natural world, he viewed the whole cosmos as a 'theatre' of God's glory – the 'theatre divine', Bruce calls it in his *Ode to a man of letters*.²⁵ It's a striking image, frequently used by Calvin. Aren't Calvinists supposed to be sniffy about the theatre? Nature, in other word, has value because God made it, it is his, and in it his glory is on display in all its marvellous complexity and diversity. He loved it so much that he came into his own theatre in the incarnate word. Jesus died not just for individual 'souls' but for the sake of the redemption of the whole cosmos.

A candidate for the Secession Church ministry, in Michael Bruce we see no Platonic matter-spirit dualism.²⁶ He refuses to disconnect what was always meant to be held together. The marvellous 'Ode to the Cuckoo' which was read to us is woven on the same cloth as the spiritually rich paraphrases we are singing this evening.

²⁴ The influence of Thomson, 'with whose descriptive and appreciative genius he was most akin' was particularly marked. See T.G. Snoddy, *Michael Bruce. Shepherd-Poet of the Lomond Braes 1746-1767* (Edinburgh: Blackwood and Sons, 1946), p. 32.

²⁵ Quotations from Bruce's poems are throughout taken from *Life and Works of Michael Bruce "The Gentle Poet of Lochleven"* (Perth: The Michael Bruce Memorial Trust, Bi-centenary Edition, 1951). In his Commentary on Isaiah, Calvin writes: 'We have been placed here as in a spacious theatre, to behold the works of God, and there is no work of God so small that we ought to pass by it lightly, but all ought to be carefully and diligently deserved.' *Works of John Calvin* in 59 vols. (Brunswick: A. Schwetckhe and Son, 1863-1900), 37:305.

²⁶ Bruce's thirst for knowledge, his classical learning and his linguistic and literary gifts converged on one all-consuming goal. In a letter he writes: 'I account all other things but as dust, in comparison with the possibility of one day being permitted to preach to my fellows the unsearchable riches of Jesus Christ' (MacKenzie, p. 32). The remarkable expression is Pauline (Ephesians 3:8). Bruce appears to have grasped the cosmic and material, as well as the personal and spiritual, dimensions of these unsearchable riches, as affirmed by Paul. The classic passage is Colossians 1: 15-20, with its extraordinary affirmation of the cosmic scope of Christ's death.

Another way of putting this is to say that Bruce was an avid reader of what had come to be referred to as God's two books. The 'book of nature' (a phrase apparently first used by Galileo) was his delight. He himself uses that expression in *To Paoli the Corsican hero*. Like 'fair Levina' in *Lochleven* he was passionately attentive to the natural world.

He was equally attentive to the 'book of Scripture'. Having learned to read it at the tender age of three, he never ceased to do so, later in Greek and in the Latin language which he mastered 'as easily as if it had been his mother tongue', marvelled Mr Dunn, his teacher.²⁷ Among his last (possibly his last) words, as he lay dying in the Kinnesswood cottage, were a direct allusion to Psalm 66:12b ('...we went through fire and through water: but thou broughtest us out into a wealthy place').²⁸ The Bible lay on his pillow, as he died, marked with a downturned leaf at Jeremiah 22: 10.²⁹

Both these books were Bruce's joy, each in its own way a revelation of their one Author, and so each serving to enhance an understanding of the other. With one voice they call humanity to the responsibility of creation care in both the senses already mentioned, of 'caring about' and 'caring for', the first inevitably leading to the second.

²⁷ Quoted in Robert Young, *The Life of Michael Bruce (1746-1767)*. A Lecture with Lantern slides (1950), archived in the National Library of Scotland. In a letter of 1766, when a student in Edinburgh, Bruce wrote, 'A few mornings ago, as I was taking a walk on an eminence which commands a view of the Forth with the vessels sailing along, I sat down and, taking out my Latin Bible, opened by accident at a place in the Book of Job ix.23 – "Now my days are passing away as the swift ships." Shutting the book, I fell amusing on this affecting comparison. ...' Snoddy (1946), p. 98. No doubt Bruce indulged a wistful look, or two, over the Forth in the direction of home.

²⁸ His exact words were: 'I shall pass through fire and water, and go to a wealthy place' Snoddy (1946), p. 22. During his final days, 'All reading was laid aside now, save his Bible. It was his sole study, and dearly he valued its aid. Constantly was it beside him as he lay in bed close by the little window, on the left side of the door on entering the house.' James MacKenzie, *Life of Michael Bruce. Poet of Loch Leven* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1905), p. 72.

²⁹ 'Weep ye not for the dead, neither bemoan him.'

CARING ABOUT

In terms of his caring *about* the natural world, two themes stand out in Bruce's work: nature's *beauty* and nature's *brokenness*.

Beauty

'Beauty', 'beautiful', 'beauteous' – the noun and adjectives are among his most frequently used words. 'Hail, beauteous Stranger of the wood!' we heard already (*Ode to the Cuckoo*). Or take the opening lines of *Lochleven*:

Hail, native land! where on the flow'ry banks

Of Leven, Beauty ever-blooming dwells;

And so repeatedly throughout. Fair Levina strays far:

To gather herbs, and the fair race of flow'rs.

That Nature's hand creative pours at will.

Beauty unbounded!

Bruce sees beauty everywhere around him. As a red-blooded young man in love, he sees it also in the female character and form and there is a good deal of romantic love in his poetry. He yearns for the embrace of the Peggy of his dreams. It's another indication of Bruce's ability to transcend the dualism of some of Calvin's successors.

Significantly, for Bruce, all this beauty of nature is a pointer to what lies beyond nature. This from his stunning *Elegy Written in Spring*:

Now is the time for those who wisdom love,

Who love to walk in Virtue's flow'ry road,

Along the lovely paths of Spring to rove,

And follow "Nature up to Nature's God".

These last words echo a line in Alexander Pope's philosophical poem, *Essay on Man*.

On this understanding, nature becomes a kind of window through which we are able to view a realm beyond nature.³⁰

In other words, what ultimately gives to the natural world its inestimable goodness and beauty is the fact that it mirrors the goodness and beauty of the Creator, to whom every part, in its own way, sings praise. Bruce had read the Psalms to good effect.³¹ Again in *Lochleven*, Bruce speaks of the natural world bending the knee to ‘the Maker of yon starry sky, Omnipotent!

He is:

*thron'd above all heav'ns,
Yet ever present through the peopl'd space
Of vast Creation's infinite extent,
Pours life, and bliss, and beauty, pours Himself,
His own essential goodness, o'er the minds
Of happy beings, through ten thousand worlds.*

Beauty, with its power to compel and its complete and disarming absence of utility, is one of many signposts scattered throughout the natural world pointing to the transcendent Creator.³² He is ‘the love that moves the sun and all the other stars,’ as Dante phrases it.³³

Brokenness

³⁰ Compare lines from George Herbert's *The Elixir* (1633): *A man that looks on glass,/ On it may stay his eye;/ Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,/ and then the heav'n espy.*

³¹ Psalms which celebrate the natural world's exuberant praise of its Creator include Psalm 8, 19, 33, 104, 139, 148.

³² See, for example, the remarkable work by David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God. Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013). Hart writes, ‘Beauty is also the startling reminder, even for persons sunk in the superstitions of materialism, that those who see reality in purely mechanistic terms do not see the real world at all, but only its shadow’ (p. 284). Of relevance to Bruce's poetic endeavours are these observations of Tom Wright: ‘It is, I believe, part of being made in God's image that we are ourselves creators, or at least procreators ... To make sense of and celebrate a beautiful world through the production of artefacts which are themselves beautiful is part of the call to be stewards of creation, as was Adam's naming of the animals. Genuine art is thus itself a response to the beauty of creation, which itself is a pointer to the beauty of God.’ Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 234.

³³ ‘L'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.’ *Paradiso*, Canto xxiii. John D Sinclair (ed.), Dante, *The Divine Comedy*. 3: *Paradiso* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939, reprint 1979), p. 484.

The signposts are real but, as Bruce fully recognises, they are broken.³⁴ For all the joy that pervades his poetry, there is a counterbalancing and pervasive note of sadness. Reflecting our Pauline passage, the themes of transience and decay and loss are never far removed. So, in *Ode: to a fountain*:

All things decay; the forest like the leaf...

Again, he contrasts the one-time grandeur of Lochleven Castle, whose arches once echoed to ‘the noise of joy and festive mirth’, with its current decayed state, its ‘melancholy walls’

Lash’d by the wintry tempests, cold and bleak,

That whistle mournful thro’ the empty halls,

And piece-meal crumble down the tow’rs to dust.

He writes moving elegies to dear friends of his youth, taken away too soon. In *Philocles* he speaks sadly of ‘life’s precarious game’ and of ‘relentless death’.

His diseased body makes Bruce aware of his own mortality:

Dim in my breast life’s dying taper burns.

Tuberculosis would take his life at the age of twenty one. In Paul’s terms, the groaning Bruce could hear clearly in the created order found its answering response in the groaning of his own heart.

And yet there is no sense in Bruce of any kind of nihilistic despair or acceptance of some dark dystopian future for the world, as found in the likes of Richard Dawkins.³⁵ In his biblically formed vision of reality, the transience of which he was so conscious is a God-given signpost. It points, not away from the created, material realm to some

³⁴ In a recent, deeply insightful book, Tom Wright explores some key ideals, including that of beauty, which people in most cultures strive for, yet often find themselves unable to attain. See Tom Wright, *Broken Signposts. How Christianity makes sense of the world* (London: SPCK, 2020). For helpful reflections on the broken signpost of ‘beauty’ see pp. 91-111.

³⁵ See also ‘Sorrow, Not without Hope, 1 Thessalonians iv. 13-18’ (53rd Paraphrase) and ‘Dying in the Lord’ (5th Hymn at end of Paraphrases) in *Life and Works* (1951), pp. 182-4. In one of his most beautiful ‘Gospel Sonnets’ Bruce roots Christian comfort and hope in the ascended Christ’s continuing identification with the suffering of his people: ‘The Enthroned High Priest, Hebrews iv. 14-16 (58th Paraphrase). *Op. cit.*, p. 175.

ghostly non-material world beyond, but rather from the world as we experience it, to the world as God intended it to be.

Bruce anticipates for himself ‘the churchyard’s lonely mound’. At the same time, he understood well Paul’s point that the earth’s, and our own, present groanings are, in a deep sense, the labour pains of coming new, embodied life in a fully restored universe. Nothing less than glory is the destiny of the redeemed creation, as it is the destiny of redeemed humanity. And the two are inseparably connected.

In the remarkable *Elegy Written in Spring*, knowing full well that his own days are coming to a close, Bruce desires, ‘when death shall shut these weary aching eyes’, to

Rest in the hopes of an eternal day

Till the long night’s gone, and the last morn arise.

It’s an anticipation of the great resurrection hope Paul again articulates in Romans 8: the coming redemption of our bodies in a creation made completely new, when, *together with us*, ‘the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God’ (Romans 8:21).

Desire

And so, nature, both in its beauty and its brokenness – seen around us and experienced within ourselves - has this capacity to evoke a longing for more. Bruce speaks, in *The Last Day* of ‘this thirst for glory’ in the human heart. It can be misdirected, yet he asks:

Wherefore gave

The great Creator such a strong desire he never meant to satisfy?

The very existence of these deep longings within tells us something vitally important about ourselves:

Man, form’d for eternity,

Abhors annihilation, and the thought

Of dark oblivion.

In the language of Ecclesiastes, God has put eternity in our hearts. And the beauties and brokenness of the natural world evoke within us a longing for life eternal in a new heavens and a new earth. With the ongoing war of aggression in Ukraine the troubling wallpaper of our daily lives as present, we can be thankful that the biblical vision of the future is of a war- and violence- free world where humanity's relationships with one another, as well as the whole created order are fully reconciled. Perfect *shalom* shall reign. In the Gentle Poet's memorable lines (18th Paraphrase):

No strife shall rage, nor hostile feuds

disturb those peaceful years;

To ploughshares men shall beat their swords,

to pruning-hooks their spears.

CARING FOR

And so, in conclusion, how might we sum up the relevance of this biblically formed holistic creation vision of the Gentle Poet for the ecological and environmental concerns of our time?

Bruce gently constrains us to reflect on whether faith in the Creator provides a wider and more integrated compass for interpreting the natural world than the arguably reductionist perspectives of atheistic naturalism.

Bruce would say that humans' declaration of UDI from the Creator God in whom, and in whose wonderful theatre of glory, we live and move and have our being, has opened the door to all kinds of potential horrors – including ecological ones. He writes:

Who loves not God,

that made him, and preserv'd, nay more – redeem'd,

Is dangerous.

Not least, ecologically dangerous, because, as we have seen, nature is no longer viewed as a wonderful gift of our Creator to be cherished and used wisely, but as a machine-like utility to be exploited for our selfish benefit. Alienation of heart and mind from the Creator has delivered a desecration of the environment. Bruce poses a penetrating question which takes us to the nub of the matter:

Can ever gratitude

*Bind him who spurns at these most sacred ties?*³⁶

Interestingly, the themes of gift and gratitude have recently been coming into some prominence in the work of some serious thinkers on environmental issues who recognize that we have lost our way in terms of knowing how to treat the world and one another. In these lines just quoted, I suggest, Michael Bruce speaks prophetically in making gratitude the central ethical issue for us human beings. The universe - the earth - is sheer gift, created in love by a God who also loves us human beings.

When we see nature as a divine gift, we immediately confer immeasurable value on it, and we have a corresponding sense of revulsion at the way it has been treated. When God is honoured in our dealing with environmental issues, as in all other relationships, the loving gratitude we are called to cultivate will be worked out in appropriate action. Love for the Creator will necessarily find expression in love for all that he has made.

This major insight runs like a golden thread through the output of our Gentle Poet. It is, I suggest, his most important contribution to the contemporary search for a solidly based environmental ethic.

As Coleridge's environmentally careless, but repentant, Ancient Mariner came to realise:

He prayeth best, who loveth best

³⁶ These last two quotations are from *The Last Day*.

*All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.*³⁷

It is an honour to place this small stone, with admiration and gratitude, on the cairn of Michael Bruce, the Gentle Poet of Lochleven.

11. Rev Dr Jock Stein, 2nd July 2023

(with the Bible reading: Ecclesiastes 7.1-12)

Last year Alan Riach published a very fine 700 page *Introduction to Scottish Literature*, but the name Michael Bruce does not appear. The contemporary Fife poet William Hershaw, also unmentioned, thinks that Fife generally is neglected in that book, and so I was really pleased to learn about the Michael Bruce Trust when David Munro contacted me. My wife Margaret and I each have parents who fished in Loch Leven, and grandparents who fished or curled there – but while we had our toes into Fife as ministers of Tulliallan and Kincardine Parish Church, I confess to a fair degree of ignorance about the Kingdom, and I was very grateful to Angus Morrison for introducing me to the writings of the ‘Gentle Poet’ some years back.

I’m interested in the way the word ‘gentle’ was attributed to Michael Bruce. You see, nowadays ‘gentle’ has lost its savour, and although older people still understand me if I say, ‘he is a real gentleman’, that’s not how young people speak. And it’s not a word you would use of many contemporary poems – I get a daily email from Rattle

³⁷ For a penetrating study of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as a prophetic parable about our place in the natural world, see Malcolm Guite, *Mariner. A Voyage with Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2017).

Poetry in America, and rattling it is, not gentle. It's like another word which has lost its meaning – 'sweet'. If I said a poem was 'sweet' it would mean I was dismissing it as sugary or trivial – the 'sweet old lady' syndrome.

George Herbert in his poem 'Love III' writes: "But quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack from my first entrance in, drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning if I lacked any thing." 'Sweetly' in that poem is exactly how I understand 'gentle' – something kind and lovely, not sentimental. The task of the poet is to question – but many contemporary poems question in a bitter or self-pitying way, not a gentle way. Real love, real art knows how to do it gently, and that is how I think of Michael Bruce asking his questions of nature and of the world, doing it in a spirit of gentle love and wonder – love of God and humankind, and wonder at the world we live in. Likewise, we should not be ashamed of saying that our Saviour is 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', even if there is more to be said than that.

And so to the main subject – Michael Bruce himself. As far as his life is concerned, I cannot really add to what is already in print, and many of you are much better informed about him than I am. I also found lots of valuable comment on Bruce's poetry in Vernon's Introduction to *The Life and Works*. But I noticed that Vernon's focus was on the three poems for which Bruce is famous: 'Lochleven', 'Ode to the Cuckoo' and 'Elegy Written in Spring'. So I thought what I should do tonight is to talk about another poem which is less known, and which I think many older people today would find uncongenial: 'The Last Day'. I say 'older people' because among younger people dystopian novels are popular, and you might almost say that the book of Revelation – and Bruce's poem – anticipate this. They are dystopian.

At one time 'The End' was a common theme for Christian preachers, partly because death was an everyday occurrence, and not shut away in homes and hospitals as it is today. John Bunyan once said, "If a man would live well, let him take his last day, and make that his company keeper." It is a wise thing to think about our end, and the

world's end, and the Christian believer can do this with hope as well as utter realism.

I have not yet mentioned our reading from Ecclesiastes. But my talk tonight is an attempt to show how the life and writing of Michael Bruce illustrate the wisdom which the old philosopher was speaking about. And so to Bruce's poem. At one level, Bruce is simply re-visiting the Book of Revelation, putting its language in a more flowery form, with a trope not so different from Dante in his *Divine Comedy* – but instead of Virgil as his guide, Bruce has an archangel. His language is very literal, expressing the visions of that last book of Scripture with a theological outlook which in those days was largely shared, held both by the Secession Church and the continuing Church of Scotland. (The Secession was sparked by a sense of unfair treatment, I think, as much as by theology.)

Ebenezer Erskine, one of the fathers of the Secession, was minister at Portmoak till 1731, and certainly would have been an influence on Bruce's own father. The Associate Presbytery had to start training its own ministers, and this started in Perth in 1737 with six students – Bruce himself would be taught by John Swanson when he spent six months in what had become the Secession divinity college in Kinross, from 1765 to 1766. My colleague David Dutton in Haddington, who knows all about this period, tells me the official name was the Burgher Theological Hall!

In his book, Edward Vernon speculates on what Bruce might have become had he not died so young. I would add my speculation as to what he might have become had he been able to study under John Swanson's successor, the famous John Brown of Haddington, who took over theological teaching in the Secession Church in 1767. John Brown had a similar background to Michael Bruce, came from Perthshire, and his father was also a weaver; Brown also worked as a shepherd, and incidentally taught himself Greek, Latin and Hebrew at the same time. Just think about that! Brown actually founded the school at Gairney Bridge in which Michael Bruce taught for a short

and not very happy while, before he went back to study at Kinross.

Now, as far as Bruce's theology goes in 'The Last Day', some might simply say, I'll stick with the Book of Revelation itself, thank you. But yet, within the poem of that name, there are some important ideas and questions, which I'd like to share with you this evening.

1 What happens when we die? Do we go immediately to be with the Lord, or does the soul sleep? I doubt whether in a bare six months at the Burgher Divinity Hall, Bruce would have met Calvin's little tract 'Psychopannucia', soul-sleep, yet Bruce asks:

But what is death? Is it an endless sleep,
Unconscious of the present and the past,
And never to be waken'd?

In context, Bruce skirts the question, as he is more concerned to argue that God has given us a desire for something after death, even if for some it becomes only a desire for some kind of memorial:

Vain is the marble . . . These stones,
Memorials of the dead . . . declare the soul
Immortal. Man, form'd for eternity
Abhors annihilation and the thought
Of dark oblivion. Hence with ardent wish
And vigorous effort, each would fondly raise
Some lasting monument, to save his name
Safe from the waste of years.

Indeed, we love monuments – how hard it is to take on board that we come into life with nothing, and go with nothing! At all the important points, not least our coming to the Lord himself, we come with empty hands – but the gospel then tells us that we go with the Lord, and what more could anyone wish?

Bruce contents himself with stating, in common with almost all his generation, that the soul is immortal. But even if we note how different is the public atheism of today, Bruce is right on the nail in

noticing how people long to be remembered. And the idea of death as ‘going to sleep’ is of course shared by believers and atheists, even if the latter can only use it as a polite metaphor for extinction.

2 Is religion just poetry? That’s a question which would be discussed later in a memorable essay by C.S. Lewis, and answered with a resounding no. Bruce is of course on the side of the angels here:

Nor is religion a chimera: Sure
‘Tis something real. Virtue cannot live,
Divided from it. As a sever’d branch
It withers, pines and dies. Who loves not God,
That made him and preserv’d, nay more – redeemed,
Is dangerous . . .

Atheists love to boast that some of their number live better lives than Christians, which is of course true – but it’s worth remembering that they exaggerate. For example, you wouldn’t know from the media that only 1% of Irish clergy were guilty of child abuse, which (even if shameful) is lower than abuse in the general population. And I have lived long enough to notice how as church influence has declined, all kinds of things from lying to litter have increased and even become acceptable.

Bruce wrote this poem while studying in Edinburgh. He would have learned from his Edinburgh teacher Adam Ferguson that the study of human beings is as important as the study of nature. In Bruce’s ‘Elegy Written in Spring’ he writes:

Not books alone,
But man his study, and the better part.

Ferguson also, like Scottish philosophers in general, taught that intellectual enquiry is not just abstract, but should connect with the purpose of education – which of course any Christian would endorse. Faith, theology without works is dead. Michael Bruce of course agreed. But I love the way he turns this on its head here, and says that

if you don't love God, you become dangerous! How different from Richard Dawkins, who used to argue that religion made people dangerously wicked – though he has recently toned down his rhetoric, as it was embarrassing his fellow-atheists.

No, religion is not just poetry – though we can write poetry about it, just as we can about nature and humanity – and Bruce wrote so well about all three.

3 What about the Holy Land? Before the 1939-45 War, the Church of Scotland had more missionaries to Israel than any other Church. Now, the significance of Israel has largely been eclipsed in Christian thought by concern for justice between Israelis and Palestinians. Bruce has a fascinating statement about the Holy Land – a name for the land of Israel which is not heard often today:

At his word,
Obedient angels stretched an ample plain,
Where dwelt his people in the Holy Land,
Fit to contain the whole of human race . . .

'Fit to contain the human race'! Fascinating! I have never heard that before. It's possible that Bruce meant the more common idea that Israel as a people is a model for the human race, or perhaps that the holy city of Revelation 21 is for all races – but that's not actually what he says, he says that the *land* is fit to contain the whole of humankind!

What on earth could that mean? I can't make much sense of it literally, but maybe, is he suggesting that all lands are meant to become holy? Perhaps I am being fanciful, but I think Bruce is at least reminding us that the land of Israel has a particular significance for all lands. And if you take the Old Testament seriously, that must be true in some sense – we see in that land and what the prophets said about it things that hold true for every land.

4 Our fourth and final question: How can we finite creatures grasp what is infinite? This is the fundamental question of all

religion, which atheists call meaningless, and agnostics too difficult. Bruce puts it sharply in this poem, seeing himself as a mere stripling devoid of insight:

But now a nobler subject claims the song . .
For how shall finite think of infinite?
How shall a stripling, by the muse untaught
Sing Heaven's Almighty . . . unequal to the task
I dare the bold attempt . . .

Bruce then goes back into Scripture, into Ezekiel and into the Gospels, with an angel dividing the wheat from the tares (weeds), and the division of people into sheep and goats at the last judgment. There may be an interesting connection here with Ebenezer Erskine who was minister of Portmoak until Bruce was about 8 years old. Erskine liked a controversial book called *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, which emphasized God's free grace, and that religion was about experience as well as head knowledge. Bruce, I would say, is well into 'Marrow theology', and that book is typical of the independent spirit found in many parts of Scotland and England. The life of Bruce himself is a wonderful witness to the way God can teach and use a person from a humble family.

Bruce was friends with the sons of lairds as well as the sons of ploughmen, and knew that a poor background did not prevent anyone from learning, and that in itself might grace any company. With God's blessing, the stripling – as he calls himself – could write about the mysteries of heaven, because 'God knows his own' and the elect see Christ among the poor. In this long poem, Bruce twice refers to the parable of the sheep and the goats. He writes (Christ is speaking in these lines):

Ye help'd the man on whom keen poverty
And wretchedness had laid their meagre hands,
And for my sake, ye did it unto me.

It's unusual perhaps, to connect a high doctrine of election, which Bruce and the Secession Church held, with democracy – but here is

what later would be called the Scottish democratic intellect at work, in the life and writing of this remarkable poet, Michael Bruce.

Let me end with a story from my own recent experience, which shows this same spirit at work in the church of today. I belong to St Mary's parish church in Haddington, and a few years ago we were sitting at a communion service, to find ourselves served bread by our then MSP, Iain Gray, and wine by our town provost, John McMillan. I wrote a sonnet about the experience:

COMMON CUP

Iain finds us bread, the kind of thing
an MSP is voted in to do,
while John behind gives out the wine, he too
enriching public service, entering
our temple courts as one of us, like when
the link of church and state was sacrosanct,
and here the Provost of a Council ranked
no higher than the least of other men
and women. Clasp hands around the cup,
we drink a portion rooted in a psalm
which pulls us back to Passover, then rolls
us on through three millennia, wraps us up
within the love of God, whose pouring arm
can ground and heal and feed all souls.

I hope Michael Bruce would have approved. Even though St Mary's is not a Secession Church, I play in the band there just a few feet away from where John Brown's famous Bible is displayed. John Brown and Michael Bruce both teach us the same thing, that a humble background is no barrier to the flowering of wonderful talent, flowering gentle and fruitful because it is watered with wisdom.

“Better a little with the fear of the Lord, than great treasure and trouble with it.” Or in the words of our scripture reading tonight, “The protection of wisdom is like the protection of money, and the

advantage of knowledge is that wisdom gives life to the one who possesses it.” Amen.