

**Sunday 23rd June 2019, 1st after Trinity;
(Diakonia Africa Europe)**

Canongate Kirk

Psalm 42: 1 *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God.*

Wie der Hirsch lechzt nach frischem Wasser, so schreit meine Seele, Gott, zu dir. Don't worry I'm not going to preach in German, or offer a simultaneous translation to the sermon, I just wanted to make it clear that just as the Psalm starts with a deer so does our story here in Canongate Kirk. It's a story that's helpfully illustrated by the symbol of our parish, the cross in the antlers of a deer depicted here on the pulpit fall and in other places and other materials around the church, and don't they say a picture is better than a thousand words in any language?!

This particular picture traces our story back through the mists of time to the twelfth century, to the year 1128 and to the day that King David went hunting in the forest that used to stand where Holyrood Park now stands just a few hundred metres to the east of here. In those days it was thickly wooded and full of deer but on that day in the course of his hunt the King became separated both from his companions and from his horse. Picking himself up from the ground legend has it that suddenly a fierce white stag appeared from the forest and charged towards him with its sharp antlers pointing straight at him. Not a thirsty deer but an angry one and the King feared that he would die but he prayed that might not, and instead of the certain death he expected as the stag bore down on him he saw a vision of the cross between the stag's lethal antlers before it suddenly stopped in its tracks and returned quietly to the forest whence it had come. And when the King returned to the Castle whence he had come a further vision convinced him to build an abbey as close as possible to the place where his life had been spared as a thanksgiving for his deliverance. And so the Abbey of the Holy Rood began to take shape all those centuries ago, and over the centuries an Augustinian monastery was built around the Abbey and eventually the guest house of the monks, which was a much more comfortable place stay than Edinburgh Castle perched at the top of the hill, evolved into the the Palace of Holyroodhouse. Later still, in 1691, this church was opened to replace the Abbey for the local Protestant congregation, which is why we can say today that like Psalm 42, our story starts with a deer. *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God.*

There is another picture in this corner of the church that tells the story of King David's mother, the saintly Queen Margaret, who epitomised the sort of ministry of Word and Service for which the Diakonia throughout the world and not least here in Scotland is renowned. In the Chapel that bears her name high above the ramparts of Edinburgh Castle is a copy of the very early book of the Gospels

which was her most prized possession. And her devotion to the Word of God was entirely matched by her sense of service, for she was well-known for her many generous acts of charity and compassion, and a selfless regard for others that led to positive changes not only in the spiritual life of the land but in its social wellbeing too. Married to King Malcolm, Margaret was in a privileged position of great wealth, but regarded herself merely as the steward of her riches, living in a spirit of inward poverty, looking on nothing as her own but recognising that everything she possessed was to be used for the purposes of God. She worked tirelessly to that end. She fed orphans by her own hand and received the destitute poor every morning, and as one of her early biographers puts it she “waited on Christ in the person of His poor”.

*Brother, sister, let me serve you,
let me be as Christ to you;
pray that I may have the grace to
let you be my servant too.*

A Ministry of Word and Service. It is the same Queen Margaret whose name was taken by the university where our friends from the Diakonia Region of Africa and Europe are staying for their assembly, and it is therefore an especially appropriate place to celebrate a ministry of word and service. That’s what we are glad to do here too, in a parish that traces its story back to Margaret’s son David, a story that began with the deer. *As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God.* And our vivid symbol reminds us that it’s a story that continues to the present day, a story – as the theme of the assembly suggests – for such a time as this, for this remains a place where Word and Service are celebrated and cherished, a place where faith and hope are nurtured and restored, a place where we continue to draw strength and inspiration from the cross in the antlers. As our own Horatius Bonar puts it:

*I heard the voice of Jesus say, Behold I freely give
The living water, thirsty one, stoop down and drink and live.
I came to Jesus and I drank of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived, and now I live in him.*

As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God. Wie der Hirsch lechzt nach frischem Wasser, so schreit meine Seele, Gott, zu dir. In David’s day and in our own day and in our own language; for such a time as this, in dieser Zeit, a ministry of Word and Service. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.