

**Sunday 30th June 2019, 2nd after Trinity.
Canongate Kirk.**

In the presence of HM The Queen.

From today's Call to Worship: **I Corinthians 13: 7**

There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance.

Last month in his capacity as Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland His Grace The Duke of Buccleuch visited our nearest Roman Catholic neighbour St Patrick's in the Cowgate, originally built as an Episcopalian church largely by his forebears in the eighteenth century. But that wasn't why he was there. The reason for the visit was the current work of the Runciman Apse Trust, which is committed to restoring in a ceiling of that church an unusual fresco, painted by Alexander Runciman whose not terribly flattering self-portrait adorns the front of today's order of service and who lies buried in an unmarked grave somewhere in our Kirkyard. It was after spending some years in Rome that Runciman came back to Edinburgh raring to recreate something of the style he had observed in places like the Sistine Chapel and by great good fortune he was commissioned to paint the ceiling of the apse in the Cowgate with dramatic scenes depicting appropriately enough the Ascension of Jesus.

But within decades the Episcopalians had moved out and a congregation of the United Presbyterian Church had moved in. Now if United Presbyterians sound to you like a contradiction in terms, you'd be absolutely right. They were a breakaway schism with a sense of irony but precious little sensitivity to the artistic endeavours of Rome-influenced Runciman and with seven layers of whitewash they promptly painted over every last trace of his painstaking work! In due course the church changed sides again and became the St Patrick's we know and cherish as our friends and neighbours today, and it was eventually realised that under the layers of paint the fresco still remains. With recent advances in modern scientific research it should now be possible to strip away the whitewash while leaving the original art work intact, hence the formation of the Trust and the visit of the Lord High Commissioner to mark the start of this exciting local and ecumenical project. *There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance.*

If endurance against the odds and through the centuries is the mark of Alexander Runciman's fresco it is also the mark of the love described so vividly in the famous thirteenth chapter of St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. There is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance. Not unlike Edinburgh in the enlightenment of the late eighteenth century, Corinth was an important cultural and artistic centre in the first century AD. It was situated on a busy trade route and both a meeting-point and melting-pot for different cultures and creeds, different religions and philosophies. And some clamoured louder than others to catch people's attention. The noisy gong and the clanging cymbal were symbolic of those passing fancies that would make a fuss and cause a stir but quickly fade away, soon to be forgotten.

Against such a backdrop St Paul urged the newly founded Christian congregations struggling to establish themselves in the face of so much opposition to focus on the things that would last, that would remain, that would endure regardless of whatever other ideas might make a fuss and cause a stir and try to drown them out. *There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance.* It was the love of God he was talking about of course. A love that endures even when it seems to be obscured, to be lost, to be as it were painted over to the point of obliteration. But it's still there under all the layers. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. *There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its*

hope, its endurance. And if it's true of the love of God it was just as true of the voice of God centuries before, in Elijah's day.

This morning in our reading from the First Book of Kings we joined the desperate prophet at the point of giving up. He'd fled for his life, he'd starved in the wilderness, he'd waited and wondered and longed to hear the voice of God coming to his rescue but even standing there on the mountain as the earthquake, wind and fire passed by he simply could not hear it. Until all the noise subsided, faded away eventually into the sound of sheer silence and he heard it at last, the still small voice of calm that had been there all along, just overwhelmed by everything else, blotted out, obscured, painted over in layers of noise if not of whitewash. *There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance.*

Back here at Canongate Kirk in the midst of our own current refurbishment, some young workmen have been unexpectedly excited to discover evidence of one of their counterparts in days gone by. Etched into at least two high panes of glass they have found the signature of one Angus Robertson of Glasgow and a date, 1790. The same year Adam Smith was laid to rest outside, and just five years after Alexander Runciman. The signatures have been there all along, right in front of our eyes, but we didn't know it and we couldn't see it. Not unlike the love of God as revealed to Elijah, as described by St Paul, as depicted by Alexander Runciman. So easily obscured and so hard to uncover, especially in this day and age of so many noisy gongs and clanging cymbals of those who do their best to drown it out or paint it over and airbrush the things of faith and hope conveniently out of sight, but there all along right in front of our eyes.

*What eye has not seen and what ear has not heard
Is taught by your Spirit and shines from your Word.*

There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to its faith, its hope, its endurance. And in its endurance lies our faith and our hope. 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.