

Memories and Celebrations
York Minster
5 December 2009

Following the very successful and enjoyable service held in York Minster recently a number of people have asked for a copy of the address given by Canon Rev Sheila Bamber

Sheila has very kindly provided the following

I was with a group of guiders from the Midlands at Foxlease last weekend, and I asked them how they felt about the centenary. Excited, happy, thankful they said. A sense of anticipation of all the good things to come, and of expectation – of fun and of mountain top moments. Privileged to be part of it. . .

But then I heard a little voice in the front row say 'overwhelmed' and another 'out of control' – a sense of too much going on and not knowing the half of it. A sense of slight hesitation, reflection, taking stock – perhaps a hint of the danger of losing focus somehow – things falling apart a bit.

And all of that is quite proper and right – both the excitement and the reservations – the enthusiasm and the hesitations. Its a big thing, this centenary – an time when we're especially conscious of all that has been and is to come - in a world that's very different from a hundred years ago, and will be different again 100 years hence – or perhaps even by tomorrow. This time for memories and celebrations isn't a nostalgia fest, looking back over the past and longing for the good old days. And it isn't a major plan for the future – its about now – this time, this year. This celebration, this recognition of all that's enduring about Girlguiding – from the past and for the future.

We've heard about some of those enduring things already – helping girls and young women to have a voice – that's what Baden Powell did at Crystal Palace that time. We've not really looked back since 1909 – now we're committed to 'girls shout out' – and to girl led guiding – making that a reality now and into the future, when as far as we can see there will be a need for girls and young women to be supported in making their views known. Independence to make choices – right from the start. Choices about joining in the first place, choosing how the programme will be, to have opportunities that were thought to be impossible then - and on into the future, giving opportunities that just won't happen otherwise.

Many of us here will have memories of the things that Guiding has given us that have shaped our lives: shaped our lives – and in some small way changed the world. Not just charitable giving, but acts of remarkable service all over the world – in war and peace, famine and flood. Support for HIV sufferers, peer education, Guide dogs for the Blind, aeroplanes for the war and the Guide International Service – did you see the Channel 4 documentary earlier in the year I wonder?

It's the spirit of Guiding, the values of Guiding – and here we are in a place that lies between the remembered past and the imagined future – and that place is now. Building on what has been towards what will be – right here and now.

Here we are in a holy place – a place where in North East England we have a tradition of gathering with our friends from all over the region, the country and indeed all over the world. York Minster – one of the finest holy buildings in our land, built to the glory of God in another time, and a place that's so much part of the city of York that you couldn't conceive of it not being here for another however many thousand years. And we've come together again this year to mark the season of Advent in words and music. We do this as part of our guiding heritage which holds God in the heart of things. 'My God' now, to be exact about the current wording of the promise that so many of us here have made.

Around the time of the First World War, Baden Powell wrote this about the men who were going to the trenches and feared – not without cause – that they might never come back:

Many a man realised then, for the first time, that though he had been taught at schools as one of a herd, preached to in church as one of a herd, drilled in the army as one of a herd, he was really a single being, having his own existence, his own consciousness, his own soul, and he might even now at any moment have these taken from him by death. It disturbed him to feel he had no exact spiritual comfort to take hold of. He knew little of religion or of God – yet he wanted something of the sort – he knew not what. Then he saw the Scout Law and he read it over and thought it out. Here was something that he could carry out and it looked like doing him good. So he came and asked if he could 'sign on to that'. He felt that if he carried out its instructions as far as he could, he would at least have the comfort of knowing that before he died he had tried to do his best, and no man could do more than that.' (1)

It was a different world – but doesn't that describe something of where God fits into Guiding, underpinning the laws by which we order our lives, and our relationship to the wider society through our duty to the Queen? And whatever the problems with the language, BP was clearly trying to get to something essential about life, and to give opportunities to the men then, and later all young people, male and female, to become fully alive and whole.

You could argue that he was a white middle class Christian man, a soldier, a product of his generation – and yet he was a man with a vision that was very attractive to many because of the clear sense of values – values that recognise the transcendent, something other that makes us unique - the awe and wonder bit, the mountain top moment bit that we hope to create with the 2010. 20.10. 20:10 moment in October next year, and in all the adventures that will happen between now and then.

In the beginning – in our remembered past – that was expressed largely through the Christian faith – we won't mention church parades but that's one of the icons that represents our heritage in this area – and there's nothing to be ashamed of in that.

Advent is a time when Christians remember the past – through the prophets who are part of our heritage with other faiths. And they – we look forward to a future with God which begins with the birth of Jesus Christ as God and man, living among us and showing us God in a way that's never been seen in the history of the world, before or since. In Advent we remember our past and imagine our future – and try to work out what we should do now in the light of the hope that the experience of the past and the possibilities of the future bring us. But dig a bit deeper and you'll find that many faiths have festivals which do this – often enough festivals of light, breaking through the darkness. Reminding us of something other – transforming, inspirational – something to put our trust in or set our moral compass by.

There's something about the present moment – this time that will happen only once – blink and you'll miss it – being fully alive. And that's part of what it means to be a Guide too. Making good use of our time – all the time, not yesterday or tomorrow but now. In this moment we've stopped *doing* to just *be* – to glimpse something of what it means to be individuals who are part of a bigger whole – and to marvel at it. To honour the things that have shaped our past – and that inform our future – and that give us life in the present. That set our compass and light our path . . . and that inform the values of Girlguiding that we believe in and that we have promised to live by.

In this moment, in this place, for all that has been, thanks – and for all that shall be, yes, please!

(1) Quote from 'Rovering to Success' taken from the WAGGGS Spirituality Pack module 1, p2)