

Humbled by history; daunted by the road ahead

Thought for the Day

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Broadcast on Radio Scotland, 9 May 2003

I'm sorry if I sound a bit harassed this morning, but I spent yesterday evening trying to attend two simultaneous anniversary parties at opposite sides of town!

The first was to mark the end of a year of celebrations for the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow. It was founded 200 years ago - in November 1802 - when 22 people, including academics and craftsmen, tradesmen and professionals, met in the Prince of Wales Tavern in the town. There, in the pub, they set up a "Society for the discussion of subjects connected solely with the Arts and Sciences". It's hard for us to imagine their world - cities not yet lit even by gas nor connected by railways; steam power barely in its infancy; our rivers running sewers, and our water drawn from wells.

But despite the huge changes in the way we live, last night those of us who gathered to celebrate and launch a book about the Society, felt we shared something with our founders all those years ago. We value the unbroken chain of tradition, and we feel an obligation to preserve and develop that tradition.

If that is true of two centuries, how much more so of two millennia?! My other party was to mark the 55th birthday of the modern state of Israel – re-established almost 1900 years after the destruction of the previous Jewish state by the Romans. Of course that celebration must be muted while there is neither peace nor security, but nonetheless Jews throughout the world feel a sense of unity with their ancient forebears, at least as much as my colleagues in the Royal Phil do with their predecessors. It's through a sense of history that we all come to share in the pain, and the pride, of the efforts of those who've gone before us.

History is always humbling, peopled by the great men and women of the past in whose footsteps we feel unworthy to walk. But equally daunting is the road ahead. It's uncharted and risky, and must be approached with caution. Nowhere can that be more true than in the Middle East, the land of the bible, the cradle of civilisation – and sadly too, the cockpit of so many conflicts. Let us hope then, as the ancient Jewish prayer says, that we will see peace and prosperity speedily in our days, for all the inhabitants of that troubled land.