

31st December 2020

Past

“You can never plan the future by the past.”

Edmund Burke, Letter to a member of the National Assembly, 1791

“Hogmanay”, the last day of the year, has been celebrated in a distinctive Scottish fashion for many generations. Our traditional gatherings, “first footing” and partying will be severely curtailed this year because of the Covid-19 restrictions. But the letting go of the past and preparing for the future is fundamental to our thinking as one year clicks over into the next.

When I was young, we brought in the New Year at my Granny’s with much revelry and an over-abundance of food and drink. And there was always the ritual of “The Bells”. When it turned midnight, tears were commonplace! Some said, “It’s been a bad year, and I’m glad to see the back of it!” Others said, “It’s been a great year, and I’m sorry to see it go!” Every New Year was the same. It was always welcomed with tears!

It occurs to me now, that this emphasis on looking to the past shouldn’t be the sole focus of our thoughts on Hogmanay. It’s inevitable that with such a traumatic year as this behind us, such thinking about the past might be overwhelming. But would Edmund Burke not say now what he said in the dying years of the 18th century? “You can never plan the future by the past.” Take note of the past, but don’t let it predominate.

I’ve been reading a fascinating book by Kim Darroch, the former UK ambassador in Washington. In the age of President Trump and as Brexit unfolded, he offers insights into one of the most turbulent periods in UK and US history. Following his resignation in 2019, Darroch recalled the words from Lady Macbeth in “The Scottish Play”: “Things without all remedy should be without regard; what’s done is done.”

What’s done is done! Let the past go. Cry if you must, when the bells ring, out of sorrow or wistfulness. But whatever 2020 has been, it can’t be changed. Look back if you must. But look forward in hopefulness too. There’s a bright tomorrow out there, when the New Year bells chime, waiting to welcome you into the newness that’s to come.

A prayer for today

Lord, where were you when I was struggling, fearful, lonely and sad? Where were you in past days? “I was by your side, my child, holding your hand, steadying you, as we stepped into the future. Come now! Let’s be hopeful together.”

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