

Text: Philippians 3:12-4:1

Sunday 21st February 2021

Brightons Parish Church

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's Word.

Come Holy Spirit, reveal Jesus to us. Come Holy Spirit, lead us in the way of Jesus. Come, Holy Spirit, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

This past week has been a significant one for the Braes Churches because the seven Kirk Sessions have all voted in favour of a draft Partnership Agreement which outlines the broad structure we would work within as a Hub across the Braes. This Partnership Agreement will now go to the Presbytery Planning Group and we hope it will be accepted. When the outcome is known, we'll keep you updated and then, maybe, be in a position to share the Partnership Agreement more widely.

Hopefully we're all aware of why we are talking about, and working hard towards, **becoming a Hub: in essence**, the Church of Scotland faces multiple difficult decisions simultaneously. Collectively, we need to address the issues of fewer ministers, dwindling finances, aging congregations and buildings, a lack of office bearers, and above all a dwindling impact and relevance within Scottish society such that few churches have young families worshipping within them and even fewer young people grow up to own the faith for themselves after they leave the church family.

This was brought home to me again recently, when the Chief Officer for the Church of Scotland wrote at the end of January to all **Presbyteries and said:**

'...our future target number for all ministry posts in five years' time would be in the region of 600. This is a reduction of around 20% on the advisory figures produced by the Ministries Council in 2018 for the number of ministers.' (Dave Kendall)

So, more change is coming, and the proposed Hub will not be with us forever, though it can guide us through the immediate future and begin a process of drawing all the Braes Churches even closer together and enable us to support one another in these difficult days. **Because, the Partnership Agreement is not the solution. Neither is the solution simply a matter of increasing finances, or recruiting more ministers, or shelving our old buildings, or even being a more attractive church to wider society. Our true problem is spiritual, rather than any of these**

other issues, and I partly believe this in light of what I read recently in two separate books, **which shared a similar thought** nonetheless:

‘Win [your community] with entertainment, and you have to keep them there by entertaining them.’ (Francis Chan) and separately: ‘In the end, what we won [young people] *with* is what we won them *to*.’ (Intergenerate)

I’m also mindful of what we read **in the book of Acts:**

‘...And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.’ (Acts 2:47)

So, our problem is spiritual because our solution is spiritual; our solution is tied to our spiritual maturity - of things we give ourselves to, the priorities that we have, the dependence on the Lord that we nurture, the vibrancy of our faith, the testimony we can share of God’s

work among us, and how we nurture our common life together. All of this is spiritual and sadly these issues, these conversations, are foreign to many of us – we don't talk about it much, maybe we feel uncomfortable to do so. As such, we probably resonate with this old quote: 'Some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good.' (Oliver Wendell Holmes) I wonder if some of us say "Yes! Amen!" to that – that is so true, I can think of people that are too heavenly minded. And this quote gives us a measure of comfort.

But what if the church today is so earthly minded that we are of no heavenly good? Have we imbibed that quote so much that we address the problems of our day with earthly solutions, rather than heavenly solutions?

CS Lewis once said:

'If you read history you will find the Christians who did the most for the present world were those who thought most of the next...It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this.' (Mere Christianity)

So, how do we change? For we still need to press on with the Hub and addressing these things because finances are running out, ministers are being burnt out and the people of the church still need to be cared for. Yet, as I say, our problem is deeper, it's spiritual not structural. So, how do we change? How do we ensure we pursue the right things and have a vibrant faith to share with the world?

Well, in our passage today, Paul calls us – and models to us – the importance of being a church which pursues

maturity through a right focus and a right attitude. **He**
says:

‘Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.’ (v12)

Firstly, let’s note that Paul is referencing what he wrote in the previous section – of knowing Jesus, of appreciating Jesus, of growing in relationship with Jesus and likeness to Jesus. Paul says he hasn’t yet obtained all this; even he, the Apostle Paul, who has been following Jesus for maybe 20 or 30 years, even he has not arrived at his goal, which in other translations is spoken about as ‘perfection’ or ‘maturity’. So, Paul himself is still seeking to mature and he wants the church to pursue this as well.

Towards that end, maturity comes about by having a right focus – a goal, a prize, a calling, he says, and as we previously mentioned last week, this is to have a relationship with Jesus, and grow in the likeness of Jesus. That's why Paul goes on to compare a heavenly focus with an earthly focus.

When our attention is predominantly captured by the things of earth then we in effect become enemies of the cross – we shun the way of Jesus – and our God is our stomach – we pursue personal satisfaction above all else, we pander to self – and this then leads to a false glory, a glory that's in shameful things, in fact we can end up valuing the wrong things, in fact, we can end up enjoying and celebrating things that offend God. **Francis Chan, one of the authors I quoted earlier, in the same chapter goes on to say:**

‘By catering our worship to the worshippers and not to the Object of our worship, I fear we have created human-centred churches.’ (pg. 53)

As a remedy to this, Paul reminds the Philippians that we can keep a right focus by remembering we are citizens of heaven. Philippi, where the group of Christians are based that Paul is writing to, Philippi was a Roman Colony and that meant they were citizens of Rome and they were to promote the interests...

of Rome and they would have sought even to make Philippi reflect the look, the feel, the customs of Rome, even though it was hundreds of miles away. Likewise, as citizens of heaven, God’s people are to point to the kingdom of God through their lives and through their values.

So, let me ask church, is this our focus, our goal? Do we prize our relationship with Jesus and seek for His kingdom to be known and grown within the Braes? Or is church about us? About what you and I can get from church? The most life-giving people I know, the most life-giving churches I know, are people who have a right focus, because then through them flows the love, power and values of God.

Yet, if we are to mature towards this goal, it doesn't happen by accident, we must also adopt a right attitude.

Paul says: '...I press on...one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize...' (v12-13)

What Paul forgets is not past mistakes, as we commonly assume, but rather his past accomplishments – he isn't settling down, Paul's not resting on his laurels or counting his chickens. He presses on, he runs the race to the very end, and likewise he calls the Philippians to **this way of living out their faith: he concludes by saying for them to, 'stand firm in the Lord in this way'. Stand firm even though they face persecution, make Jesus the highest priority of your life – is what he's saying.**

Friends, are we standing firm? Are we showing your allegiance to Jesus, first and foremost in our lives?

For example, I'll give you a number of questions here:

Are you reading the Scriptures? Have you started the New Testament plan for this year? And are you putting your faith...

into practice? Are you serving? Are you giving to the life of your congregation in some way, however small, however behind the scenes? Also, are you giving financially? What we spend our money on shows what we value. Have you looked at that recently? Have you considered whether that needs to be adjusted in any way? And finally, are you nurturing the faith of others, of one another? Our reading plan took us into Hebrews **this week and on Friday we were reminded of these words:**

‘See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is

called 'Today', so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.' (Hebrews 3:12-13)

Are we encouraging the faith of one another? Is our faith of enough worth that we speak of it? Or do we only speak about work, family, the weather and the things that we complain about?

Brothers and sisters, we are called to maturity through a right focus and right attitude – and we all have a part to play in this. Fewer buildings, more ministers, an all-singing all-dancing Hub are not needed to make this happen; it simply takes you responding to the Word of God. And that's a choice we can all make.

So as Paul says, and I say to you, My brothers and sisters, you whom I love and care for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, dear friends.

I pray it may be so, and want to take a moment to pray now, and give us space to respond.

So let us pray.

Our last hymn was that call for a closer walk with God, that call to shed the dearest idol, the dearest thing, that we might give our worship to above, and before God that we might then worship God alone

I wonder friends, I wonder where you need to seek a closer walk with God what is it you're going to respond to today from today's message.

Do you need to prioritize Jesus in some way?

Do you need to prize him more?

Do you need to give Him your time?

Do you need to serve in some way?

Do you need to sacrifice embarrassment and being uncomfortable, and have a conversation about faith and spirituality with someone?

Come Holy Spirit, come and speak to our hearts, show us where we are to respond today.

Lord, if there's someone we're to speak with today or the coming week about spiritual matters would you bring them to mind just now.

Come Holy Spirit

Holy Spirit reveal how we might grow closer to Jesus.

Is there a sin that we need to turn from? Convict us Holy Spirit.

Is there a choice we need to make to read Your word, to be in prayer, to serve, to give? Come Holy Spirit, reveal the way of Jesus to us.

Friends, whatever's come to mind, why don't you just take a moment in the silence and the stillness or even with the kids buzzing , just take a moment to speak it out to God either quietly or audibly - who's that person, what's that choice, what's that sin you need to turn from? Get real with the Lord, right now. Don't wait till after, do it now. Come Holy Spirit.

Oh lord, how we adore You, we want to adore You even more, that You would be our goal and prize, You would

**be what we run towards day after day, and all our days.
Lord, help us shed the sin that so easily entangles, the
traditions or distractions or whatever it may be, Lord,
that keep us from Your way.**

**Help us shed them and help us choose You and choose
the things that are of You, and prioritize You, and show
Your kingdom, and build Your church, Lord, come have
Your, way fill us afresh today with Your Spirit.**

**Give us that power to choose Your way over the way we'd
so easily take because of sin. Come Lord, fill us afresh that
we would stand firm in You this way, this day, every day
this week Lord,**

for we ask You in Your name and for Your glory,

Amen