

**Texts: Isaiah 44:1-8 and Acts 1:1-14**

**Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**The Church**, in every time and in every place, has found itself in changing circumstances, and faced with that, the Church has had to walk **a tightrope** between holding onto what is core and changing the rest so as to fulfil its mandate to “make disciples of all the nations”. I don’t know about you, but it feels like we are finally, finally, coming into a time as a Church where we appreciate that something has to change. I have my reservations about some of the changes our denomination is making.

**But here at Brightons**, it feels like you are aware of the need to keep the tension between holding on to what is core and that, nevertheless, there must be change too.

**Your parish profile** said that you wanted to - “remain vibrant, relevant and accessible to all and always true to God’s word” –

and yet you were also honest about the necessity of change **because you wrote** that you need to – “Increase and enhance our prayer life...Expand our outreach...[and] Secure the future of the Church through creative work with children, families and young people.”

**When I spent** a very powerful and informative 2.5 hours being interviewed by your nominating committee, they put me through my paces to make sure the core would be core, and that was good to experience. But they were also honest about the needs of the congregation and receptive to a number of challenging questions I had for them.

**So, even though you are a healthy, vibrant congregation, it's really encouraging to see you facing up to reality, that you are not content to rest on your laurels.**

**At present** I am a locum for a vacant linked charge up north, and I a member of the Ministries Council for the Church of Scotland, so I am aware that being in a season of change and facing even more change in the future can be unsettling for many, even scary; it can raise all sorts of questions and uncertainties.

**So, what might God's Word** say to us in the midst of such times? Well, in the books of Acts we find the early church in changing circumstances too – they are on the cusp of truly significant change, change like they had never seen nor expected.

**And so Acts, especially those early chapters, gives us insight into some core things to remember, and hold on to, especially in the midst of change.**

**Acts opens with these words: “In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach until the day he was taken up to heaven.”** From the earliest times, the writing of the book of Acts has been attributed to Luke, that Gentile doctor who put his faith in Jesus and became a valuable helper and loyal friend to the Apostle Paul. So, Acts is the second instalment from Luke: in his former book, that is, the gospel which bears his name, Luke wrote about all that Jesus began to do, detailing the life of Jesus and his ministry on earth.

**But notice what that sentence says: “all that Jesus began to do” – not, ‘all that Jesus did’ – but ‘all that Jesus began to do’. So, Luke’s gospel details Jesus’ ministry on earth and Acts details the continuing ministry of Jesus today.**

**Luke can write such a claim because of his confidence that Jesus is alive. Luke writes that, “After his suffering, he [Jesus] presented himself to them [the disciples] and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive.” Luke is convinced of this, convinced of its reality, that Jesus is alive, and so the ministry of Jesus continues, and continues even to this day.**

**Can I ask you this question: do you believe that? Do you have the confidence of Luke? As I outlined to our children and young people,...**

**there is great evidence to give us confidence that Jesus is alive. It is crucial for us to know this, to be confident of it, because in our changing circumstances as a church, in the changing circumstances of life and all the struggles of life, to be confident that Jesus truly is alive changes everything. This core truth gives courage in difficulties, sustains passion across the decades, fuels hope that a better future is ahead for our church, for us individually, and for our world.**

**So, can I ask: do you believe that Jesus is alive? Are you confident in this? If you are not, I encourage you to seek help – speak with your locum, speak with your elders, read The Case for Christ, but I beg you do something, for Jesus is alive and His ministry continues.**

Now, that continuing ministry can, if we let it, challenge us and change us. Luke writes that, “He [Jesus] appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.” But that prompted the disciples to ask Jesus, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” They were expecting a political and territorial kingdom, a national kingdom of Israel, and they hoped it would be established now.

In response, the continuing ministry of Jesus brings a challenge to their thinking. Jesus said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

**There is so much in those two verses, but let us for now, notice this: the continuing ministry of Jesus challenged them – it challenged their ideas about Jesus and the kingdom. For the kingdom of God is primarily spiritual in character, that as people submit to the reign of God in their lives He transforms their hearts and renews their minds. This kingdom would also be international and grow gradually. So even after three years of intense discipleship, and a further 40 days with the risen Jesus, these early followers still had much to learn, the continuing ministry of Jesus was still challenging their thinking and way of life.**

**So, **what about us?** How is the continuing ministry of Jesus challenging our thinking and our way of life, individually and corporately?**

**At the beginning of this message, I spoke about the changing and challenging circumstances that we find ourselves in, both locally and nationally. So often we look on it negatively: the number of ministers is dropping, buildings are closing, parishes are expanding...and the list goes on.**

**But what if we are in a divine moment? Have you wondered that yet? A divine moment of opportunity, where the continuing ministry of Jesus might challenge our thinking and our way of life so that the kingdom of God extends to the ends of the earth but begins growing right here too. Have you wondered that yet?**

**Returning to those disciples, I'm sure some of them felt shock and horror as Jesus said those words,...**

**maybe some of them thought: ‘Jesus, we are only 120 people! How is that ever going to happen?! You cannot be serious!?’ But Jesus knew that by His continuing ministry in and through them, by the Holy Spirit, that this world would be turned upside down, that the words of Isaiah would come true: that some would say, “I belong to the Lord” and become part of the family and people of God.**

**Jesus has just challenged their thinking about the future, so how is the continuing ministry of Jesus challenging us? How is Jesus challenging you?**

**With the nominating committee I outlined a number of key principles for myself and any future ministry...**

**One being that I felt the church at large needs to wake up to the fact that we are all called to be witnesses, we each are disciples of Jesus, and we each are to go and make disciples. We are to share our faith, we are to call people to follow Jesus, to repent and live for Him. I was grateful that a member of the nominating committee was honest in the interview about their own uncertainty with doing that, that reaching out to peers, especially successful, affluent, capable peers is daunting and often we just don't know what to do – partly because we haven't been disciplined in that ourselves. But this same person showed a conviction that they were willing to lean into that call, that they wanted to play their part – and it was inspiring to hear.**

**I suspect she is not alone, I suspect that many of us here have the same apprehension...**

**But we are each called as witnesses, as disciples who are to go and make disciples, and so my question is: are you up for that? Because this is one of the key challenges of Jesus to us all in our day, and I will seek to lean into that personally, with you, and with the elders, and I will seek to lean into that if you call me here.**

**For the continuing ministry of Jesus brings challenge, and that is but one, I am sure there will be more, whether here in Brightons or for our church nationally.**

**Now you might say: ‘well it was easy for the disciples – Jesus was right there in their midst.’ But notice what happens after Jesus leaves – they “returned to Jerusalem ...went upstairs to the room...[and] joined together constantly in prayer.”**

**Prior to His leaving, the disciples had spent time with Jesus, they had listened to His teaching, they had soaked in the love of God – and so now it is instinctive for them to turn to Him in prayer, and that is how they will wait upon Jesus, that is how they will wait upon His provision and leading. Again and again this comes up in the book of Acts – the disciples come together in united prayer and God leads them and provides for them.**

**Maybe they also** came together because of that commission Jesus had given them in v8: **“you will be my witnesses”**. The Greek word for ‘witness’, is the exact same root word as for our English word ‘martyr’. So, Jesus has just called them to a sacrificial way of life, to loyalty whatever the cost.

**But these early followers of Jesus, were so confident in the continuing ministry of Jesus, were so challenged and captivated by that ministry, were so aware of their need to depend on Him, that they came together in prayer.**

**Friends, can the same be said of us? Do we unite in prayer here? It can be so tempting to rush ahead, we prefer to get on with the job – we don't like waiting, we don't like being dependant on another.**

**But the truth is, we can't do this on our own and if we are to grow in confidence in the continuing ministry of Jesus; if we are to hear the challenge of the continuing ministry of Jesus; if we are to receive all that we need, to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus, then we must wait, we must wait upon Him.**

**We can of course do this individually at home, but the testimony of Christians across the ages is that coming together in prayer is crucial for the people of God. If we are to know His leading, if we are to know His providing, if we are to have courage to make the costly choices and be His witnesses, then we must pray, and pray together.**

**I've heard that your nominating committee is very prayerful. I'm aware that you have a prayer meeting before the Sunday service and hopefully in your home groups, or in other ways, you are praying too.**

**But if you personally are not gathering in prayer, some way, some how, can I ask that you try to find a way? If the time is difficult, if the day is difficult, if you're unsure how to pray, please speak with your elder,...**

**feed it back to your Session and they might find a way to support you. But at some point you must make the choice, you must decide that prayer is a priority, for only by prayer will you find the confidence that Jesus is alive, only by prayer will you have the courage to respond to the challenge of Jesus. The testimony of the early church and the church across the ages, is that the people of God must unite in prayer, if they are to participate in the continuing ministry of Jesus.**

**In these changing times, are you confident that Jesus is alive? Will you respond to His challenge at this present time? And will we come together in prayer? The ministry of Jesus is continuing and to Him be the glory, both now and forever. Amen.**