

**Text: Psalm 32 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21**

**Sunday 31<sup>st</sup> March 2019**

**Brightons Parish Church**

**This past week has been a week of futures and of facing up to reality. Principally we've seen that over Brexit as politicians have wrestled in Westminster all week, most especially as they face the realities of deadlines, lack of votes, bickering, power struggles, ambition...you name it, it has probably had an influence this week. Future hopes have met with the reality of political life.**

**Then this week, the Church of Scotland has also begun to release the Radical Action Plan that the General Assembly called for last year. You probably were quite unaware of this development, but the Radical Action Plan will have an effect on us as a congregation, and in May this year,... Eric and I will be at the General Assembly representing this congregation and the Presbytery as the Plan is debated.**

**The Radical Action Plan seeks to face up to the reality within which we find ourselves as the Church of Scotland and propose some initial steps as a means to secure a better future for the Church. Again, future hopes meeting with the reality of church life.**

**And I give these two examples because I find it “curious” that they have arisen on the week leading up to our **Annual Business Meeting** – that moment in the yearly calendar when the trustees of Brightons Parish Church, namely the elders and deacons, make a report to the wider congregation, as required by our constitution – a report which will be sent to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator (AKA: OSCR). The report gives a broad overview of the past year, in what is called the “narrative”, and it details how we have sought to fulfil our charitable aims and some of what has been achieved.**

**The report then gives the financial accounts for last year, which were very positive (thank you), and the anticipated budget for the coming year. And that's one area where we need to know the reality here in Brightons Parish Church as we think about our future. It is a bit unusual to share this during the sermon, but knowing that business meetings are not particularly well attended in any congregation, for any number of reasons, the Stewardship Team of the Kirk Session felt it appropriate to flag this up during the service. So, here's the reality we need to be aware of – **in this financial year**, we face a funding shortfall of £20,000; we are going to be short of £20,000 by the end of December because we anticipate needing to spend more than we currently have coming in. Again, future hopes meet with the reality, this time, of congregational life.**

**So, as we journey through Lent, turning to the passages set out by the Lectionary, what might God say to us? What might He remind us of, or encourage us to hold on to, in this week of future hopes meeting with reality?**

**There is a lot that could be said of our passages today, indeed we touched briefly upon the 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians passage back in early February, and yet the wonder of Scripture is that by God's Spirit it is alive and active, ready to speak into a multitude of situations and bring us something for today, for now.**

**In the writings of Paul to those believers in Corinth, believers who struggled with so many issues, Paul reminds them of some core truths – truths of God, truths of themselves, truths of reality...**

**Indeed, there are too many truths to speak on this morning, but which of them might speak into our situation today, now?**

**As we think about our future here in Brightons, and face up to reality, I am struck that Paul writes: “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them.” (2 Cor. 5v18-19a)...who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. To every individual who claims the status of Christian, child of God, follower of Jesus – to each one is given the ministry of reconciliation. Whether you had a dramatic story like mine, or a gentle, gradual development of faith –**

**wherever you are on the spectrum, we each are still a new creation, we each are still reconciled to God through Jesus – and so we each have been given the ministry of reconciliation.**

**That very ministry carried Paul to the ends of his known world, through one disaster after another. In the same letter as we read from, **Paul will write in chapter 11**: “Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.”**

**The ministry of reconciliation changed Paul's life beyond comprehension – this wasn't a lifestyle choice he could fit around his other commitments whenever he felt like it; this wasn't a hobby that he tinkered with now and again; this wasn't even a membership that he could blow hot and cold with. Paul had come to know the living God, the risen and reigning Jesus Christ, and in coming to know that God, this Jesus, Paul was not only given forgiveness and hope – he was given a ministry, a way of life, something that directed every choice, every decision, something that shaped his time, the use of his talents and yes, also, his financial situation – to him was given this ministry of reconciliation.**

**And it is given to each of us.** We each are called to go and make disciples, to share the good news of the Kingdom of God, and invite one and all into a relationship with the risen Jesus Christ. We each are called to the ministry of reconciliation. We are called to let it shape our lives but where on the scale of priorities does being called to the ministry of reconciliation, come for you?

**A few weeks ago,** we had an older couple round for dinner at the manse. They are dear friends of ours, and have been since Gill and I were married, and when we get together, we catch up and we find out how their four grown children are doing. The second oldest daughter is now in her early 30's and soon to be married in April. She became involved in a church plant to an area of deprivation in the city she where lives; she has a real sense of call to the people,

**and especially the young people, of that particular area. So much so, in fact, that one of the criteria for whom she would marry, is that her future spouse had to be willing to come and join the church plant with her; she would not sacrifice that calling, to that area, to those people, even though she longed to marry. Now, she is not a minister or a pastor, everything she does for this community is on a voluntary basis – and yet she was willing to risk her future marital status for the sake of her ministry of reconciliation to the people of that very community. It's hard enough to find a marriage partner; it's harder still to find someone you share the same values with; but it's astounding to have that as a criteria for a future spouse.**

**Here is a young woman, whose life is so shaped by her relationship to Jesus, and from whom she has received the ministry of reconciliation to that particular area,...**

that she is willing to walk a costly path, to sacrifice her heart's desire, to fulfil that very ministry.

**Friends, the ministry of reconciliation** will always be costly – it was costly for Jesus, that He “who had no sin [became] sin for us” – it was costly for Paul, as we read – and it has been costly for my friends' daughter. But Jesus paid the cost and bought reconciliation for us all. Paul paid the cost and the good news of reconciliation spread profoundly throughout the Roman Empire under his leadership. My friends' daughter paid the cost and she, along with others, is seeing a new church take root in the hardest of areas, with young families joining, and lives being transformed.

Friends, the question is: are we willing to pay the cost?

**For the last four weeks**, Eric has faithfully stood up and shared two of our current volunteer vacancies, but we still have gaps, we still need folks to get involved. Will you hear the call of God to you this day, and pay the cost, by stepping up and contributing to the ministry of reconciliation in this place with your time – even if it does not benefit you directly?

**Or, what about our funding shortfall?** £20,000 sounds like an awful lot of money, does it not? And yet, if you break it down, **it amounts to an extra** £3 per week from each adult beginning next Sunday. If we all gave an extra £3 each from now onwards, we would meet that shortfall. Some of us, may not be able to give £3 extra, and if that's you, give what you can – some of us, can afford to give more than £3 extra per week, and again, we should give what we can. But are we willing to pay the cost?

**Giving £3 extra per week** will mean that we keep our buildings functional and warm, and our buildings allow us to do so much in this community – **from activities that breakdown isolation** and give a place to find support and community, at any stage of life, to activities that engage with 150 children, young people and their families each week, to activities which build faith, transform the world through prayer, and create a place of worship to the living God in this very community - our buildings allow all this and so much more and there is still much more to come.

**Giving an extra £3 per week** will mean we can sustain our excellent pastoral care system, from having Ian Baillie as pastoral assistant to resources for those conducting pastoral visits and all that happens to support us here.

**Giving an extra £3 per week will sustain so very much, and I'd hate to think what we might have to cut, if we do not overcome our funding shortfall, for our treasurer and trustees have been as prudent as possible - this £20,000 is not for excessive costs, it is for core costs within Brighton's Parish Church, because our ministry of reconciliation, collectively, is broad, varied, regular and touching so many lives.**

**And as such this congregation** needs the budget set out or we start pruning our ministry of reconciliation here and someone, somewhere feels the cost of that. But with only £3 extra, per week, per adult, we don't have to cut, we can maintain and continue to flourish. But will we hear the call of God this day, and pay the cost, by stepping up and contributing to the ministry of reconciliation in this place?

**My wife and I do not count ourselves exempt in this, and as such, we have completed Standing Order and Gift Aid forms to give to the Finance Team and the bank – we are in this with you, we are willing to pay the cost, because we are committed to the ministry of reconciliation through Brightons Parish Church.**

**Friends, this Lent,** as we journey towards Easter, and seek to listen for the voice of Jesus in our time, allowing the words of the Father to shape our hearts as they did the heart of Jesus, will we hear the call of God to give of ourselves to the ministry and message of reconciliation? Will we pay the cost such that our future hopes might be realised within the realities of our present time? I pray it may be so. Amen.