

Text: John 16:1-15 and Ephesians 2:13-22

Wednesday 17th April 2019

Brightons Parish Church

I reckon that any minister in a new charge always starts with some goals in mind of what they would like to achieve in the initial months and years with a new congregation. One of my goals is to visit folks in their home and I thought I would start with our 32 elders and 12 deacons. Twelve weeks into the charge, I have come to realise that it is going to take me some time to get around everyone – indeed, for the elders and deacons alone, I anticipate finishing their visits sometime in June. So, thank you to everyone else if I have not visited you yet, your patience is much appreciated.

In carrying out these visits I have found such joy, I have loved hearing people's stories, their stories of life, their stories of faith. In this past week, I visited one of our members who was a builder by trade and it was a delight to hear this gentleman speak of his passion for building, for taking a site, whether old or new, and creating something in that place, of seeing the landscape change and a plan become reality. What I found particularly interesting was that this builder often enjoyed going back to those sites, after they were complete, and seeing the life lived out there: of children playing in the street, in a garden, with their friends; or someone returning in their car and going into a place that had now become their home. As he shared this, he helped me see that the completion of the building site is not the end, it is simply a beginning, a beginning of a new community, a beginning of a new place of life.

In our passage from the gospel according to the Apostle John, Jesus is with His disciples in the upper room, gathered together for the Passover Festival and meal. He has washed their feet; He has predicted His betrayal and Peter's denial; and foretold the opposition which the disciples will face from the world. But Jesus has also sought to give comfort, reassurance and words of instruction to prepare them for what lies ahead in that week and even beyond.

In the midst of it all, Jesus has reaffirmed that He will be leaving the disciples, leaving them even though hard times will come. It begins to dawn on the disciples that Jesus really is going to leave them, and the reality of that weighs heavily upon them such **that Jesus will say**: 'None of you asks me, "Where are you going?" Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things.' (John

16:5-6) This grief has stilled their tongues, rendered them speechless, and swamped them with such sorrow that they could not see beyond the looming departure of Jesus. The disciples do not appreciate that Christ's departure, firstly in His death and then in His ascension, is not the end, it is a beginning – for Jesus has a mission, a long-term plan, a purpose, one that gives Him such joy that the writer to the Hebrews can say it enabled Jesus to endure the cross and scorn its shame. So, what was that purpose?

We each might answer that question somewhat differently, for the passion of the Christ, the death and resurrection of our Jesus, achieved and fulfilled so very much. The old analogy is true:...

the cross of Christ is like a multi-faceted diamond such that no one explanation or description of the event can give the whole picture of what Jesus accomplished.

Indeed, the teaching of Jesus in the upper room itself, gives many such answers to the question: what was the purpose of the cross? But in the portion which we read tonight, Jesus speaks of the One who will come later, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit. He will be given to the disciples, to the Church. He will be given as part of the wider purposes of the Christ and of His Cross. **The Apostle Paul writes of this in Ephesians 2:** ‘His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two [that is Jews and Gentiles]...[reconciling] both of them to God through the cross...[and building them] together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.’ (Eph. 2:15, 16, 22)

Jesus had a purpose: of creating in himself a new people, a people who are built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit. His departure, His death and ascension, was not the end, it was a beginning.

I remember when I first read those words and appreciated some of their meaning. I've shared with the folks here at Brightons that I grew up in the Church of Scotland, I was baptised in it, I went to its Sunday Schools and Youth Fellowships – I was welcomed, I was supported, I was encouraged and I felt a sense of being at home in the congregation where I went with my Gran.

But my upbringing in the Church of Scotland did not form in me any awareness of these purposes of the cross: I did not know that God was building a community in which He lived by His Spirit; indeed, God Himself was vague...

and distant, no one shared testimony or story of their journey of faith, of how they had seen God at work or prayer answered, or how lives were transformed by the One who chose to endure the cross and scorn its shame for me, and for you. God was reduced to a moral teacher, supervisor and judge. He was so very distant and no lasting impression was made on me of a God who had cosmic purposes, who moved in power even today and who by His Spirit wanted to live in a real, dynamic relationship with me and with anyone who would respond to Him.

So, when I came to faith, and God became real, to read the words of Ephesians 2:22 was mind-blowing: God is building me into His church to be a dwelling in which He lives by His Spirit. This is more than moral teaching, this is more than fulfilling religious duty or being “religious” –

a term used by the world to describe those with faith, but which misses the purposes of the Christ and of His cross. Hear me on this – I cannot care less about being religious, but I do have a hunger for something more: to be part of a mission that is more than a marketing campaign; to learn a way of life where acts of mercy are more than doing the easy good thing; to be part of a body of people who are more than a religious club such that their voice rings out with the authority of prophetic dissonance in our contemporary culture; where miracles are multiplying; where the gospel is preached ‘with signs following’; and the kingdom of God is truly ‘not a matter of talk but of power’ (1 Cor. 4:20); for faith is experienced as a real, deepening, and conversational relationship with the living God.

I long for an adventure of faith like that, a journeying with God that is holy, that is other, that is wild, and free, and which reflects this grand, dynamic, effervescent purpose of the cross: to build together a people who will be a dwelling in which He lives by His Spirit.

In our Holy Week service on Monday, Debbie called for us to ‘wake up and let the new day begin’; and in last night’s service, Mary created space for us to consider where God might be pruning and shaping us, so as to bring forth fruitfulness in our lives and in our congregations.

Friends, what if the wake-up call is beyond where you have currently travelled in your faith? Will you follow that call of God into these very purposes of the cross that there might be a new day for the Church in Scotland? And if the pruning and shaping of our heavenly Gardener,...

is towards a letting go of comfortable moralism and religious duty, and a stretching up and into a way of life that is naturally supernatural, will you bend and follow His leading?

Whilst training, one of my fellow candidates wrote her third-year project on “mission in the 21st century” and she touched on some of the **values of our pluralistic, post-modern culture**. Her source identified 12 such values, and my friend highlighted that many of these could be a bridge for engagement between the Church and the wider culture, **values such as** creativity and the arts, of community, and of environmentalism – values which we probably feel comfortable with and supportive of.

But what about the values of ‘spirituality’? That desire for wholeness in the midst of fragmentation,...

for liberating transcendence, for meaning in life? Are we ready to share that, for it is very personal and at times, I suspect we are quite uncomfortable sharing the personal dynamics of faith and our own spirituality? Or what of the value of ‘the experiential’? How comfortable are we with sharing a faith that is more than good morals and which includes an experiential relationship with the living God?

Many in our culture, not just in the young, are searching for something more – for a spirituality that brings wholeness and a true sense of the transcendent, of the holy, of God Himself – and rightly so for our world is broken and breaks people every day, so we yearn for wholeness. But equally we yearn for the transcendent, for God Himself, because God has placed eternity in the heart of all.

I most recently saw this in action when serving as locum up in Kirkhill and Kiltarlity, two villages 15 minutes west of Inverness. We as a family were up there for 3 or 4 months as we awaited the vacancy process advancing and God's leading becoming clear. Whilst there, we were so blessed to play a small part in one mum's flourishing journey of faith - her name is Marion and she has become a dear sister.

Up until November last year, Marion did not attend church, but now she is there every week, she is involved in an outreach to the local primary school, and her children and husband often attend as well. I hope to eventually ask Marion to share her story in a video recording, but until then, and with her permission, you'll have to settle for me telling you a little of her story.

As I said, Marion did not attend church, and largely that was because of its seeming irrelevance and the hypocrisy she had seen in the church whilst growing up. But then in the autumn of last year an event rocked her world; not ill health, not a death, but an event nonetheless that left her feeling shaken, uncertain, and alone, even though she is out-going, confident, successful and with a large social circle.

In the midst of that dark place, she found God – and she found Him to be close and real and tangible, such that, she says, she will never feel alone ever again. And I'm so glad for that, because she is already experiencing some degree of persecution – many friends are supportive, but others have cooled in their friendship, still others have reacted out of their own negative experiences of church

to call her “a Bible basher” even though all she has done is tell them she has become a Christian.

But Marion shrugs it off, and continues to shine, because she knows God – she doesn’t just know facts about Him, she doesn’t just know the good morals of Scripture – she knows the living God, He is real to her, and in that relationship together she is finding a way of life that fuller than what she had before. She has found a faith that has brought wholeness and an experience of God, of the One who is transcendent and holy. Marion has come to realise, and revel in the reality, that God is building together a people who will be a dwelling in which He lives by His Spirit, and she is now part of that.

My friend Marion has come to experience something of the purpose of the cross, to realise that in the departure of Jesus in death and then in ascension, it is a beginning, not an end. May we, this Easter, as we journey towards the cross and then to the resurrection, may we also see its purpose, its beginning, and so heed the call and shaping of God, to be a dwelling in which He lives by His Spirit.

I pray it may be so. Amen.