

Text: Acts 1:1-14

Sunday 19th January 2020

Blackbraes and Shieldhill with Muiravonside

Parish Churches

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

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 everything else so as to fulfil the mandate given to us by Jesus Himself, the mandate to “go and 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, and indeed in the Braes churches we know something of that very keenly in light of the reality that the number of full-time ministers within the Braes area will drop to two by this summer.

When I came to Brightons last year, I knew I was coming to a congregation, who at least on paper, were aware that there was a need to change, whilst also holding on to what was core. So, even though Brightons was seen by many others within the Presbytery as a healthy, vibrant congregation, it encouraged me to see them facing up to reality, that they were not content to rest on their laurels and they were willing to engage in a process of change so as to fulfil our God-given mandate.

When I came to preach as their sole nominee in November 2018, I was at that time locum for a vacant linked rural charge up north, and also a member of the Ministries Council for the Church of Scotland. Both these experiences helped me to understand that being in a season of change and...

facing even more change can be unsettling for many of us; it can raise all sorts of questions and uncertainties. Indeed, the folks at Brightons in this past year have felt these things as we have begun to change and face further change in the future.

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 as well – they are on the cusp of truly significant change, change like they had never seen nor expected and so, the book of Acts, especially those early chapters, gives us insight into some core things to remember, 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 then 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 in v3 that, “After his suffering, he [that is 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.

So, can I ask you a question: do you believe that? Do you have the confidence of Luke? It is crucial for us all 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.

So, can I ask again: do you believe that Jesus is alive? Are you confident in this? If you are not, I encourage you to seek help because there is great evidence to give us confidence that Jesus truly is alive. You could speak with your locum, speak with your elders, read a book I found helpful called 'The Case for Christ' by Lee Strobel, but I beg you do something, for Jesus is alive, His ministry continues and being confident of this makes all the difference in times of change.

Now, that continuing ministry can, if we let it, also challenge us and change us. Luke writes in v3 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 in v6, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" They were expecting a political and territorial kingdom, and they hoped it would be established right away.

But in response the continuing ministry of Jesus brought a challenge to their thinking. Jesus said to them in v7: “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 His kingdom. So even after three years of intense discipleship 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, both individually and corporately?

At the beginning of this message, I spoke about the changing and challenging circumstances we find ourselves in, both locally and nationally as a church. So often we look on it negatively: the number of ministers is dropping, buildings often closing, parishes expanding...and the list could go on and 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 does extend to the ends of the earth but begins growing right here as well. 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're so few in number! 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.

Jesus challenged their thinking about the future, so how is the continuing ministry of Jesus challenging us?

As I say, maybe the challenge for us in the Braes area, is to see what is happening as an opportunity, as a divine moment. I know that sounds a bit odd to hear, maybe even hard to hear, but I have my reasons for suggesting it.

One of those reasons is my experience of the small rural churches where I was locum in 2018. In September 2018 I moved up to Kirkhill and Kiltarlity Parish Churches, which are situated about 15 minutes west of Inverness. Their minister had followed a call the previous month to Dundee, and as of today, they have not yet formed a nominating committee due to a variety of factors. As a result, they have been without a full-time minister for 17 months, and only had a locum for the first 4 months when I was there, due to the shortage of locums in the Highlands.

Now, the reason for highlighting these churches is that during these past 17 months, one of the congregations has grown, especially in regard to the number of children and families attending on a Sunday morning.

When the minister left, that congregation had around half a dozen children attending, but now they are seeing about 15-20 children and young people each week. Sadly, the other congregation has not seen similar growth.

So, why the difference between them? Well that's hard to pin down exactly, as it would be for any congregation, but my observations from my time amongst them do throw up some questions for me. For example, one church has a reasonably healthy attendance at its weekly prayer meeting before the service, the other doesn't. Similarly, the healthier congregation has a greater number of adults who share some very important core values. These adults are convinced Jesus really is alive, they are convinced the risen Jesus has called them to share the good news of the Kingdom, and so they make

time to do that, even at personal cost to themselves. Furthermore, the healthier congregation has a greater willingness to change, a willingness that comes from a deep and active relationship with God – to them, God is much more than a concept, He is very real and personal, they can tell you stories about how God has impacted their life.

As a result of all these factors one congregation is changing positively, even amidst a time of uncertainty and with no minister. Because of their commitment to prayer, their sharing of some crucial core values, their willingness to change and their deep relationship with God, the continuing ministry of Jesus is having an impact on their village in a much greater way than I ever saw with the other congregation.

Two very different dynamics, which are replicated across our nation, so what's the situation here in [Blackbraes and Shieldhill]? And whichever congregation you are more akin to, how might the continuing ministry of Jesus be challenging you to change?

Friends, I am aware that the changing circumstances we all find ourselves in can be unsettling. It can, and probably is, stirring up a whole range of emotions and questions.

But in these changing times, if we are confident that Jesus is alive, if we are willing to respond to His challenge at this present time, then the continuing ministry of Jesus will be seen here, the Kingdom of God will come in our midst and we will be able to look back on it as a divine moment. May it be so. Amen.