

Sunday 13th March 2022

John 3:1-16

Rev.Scott Burton

Blackbraes & Shieldhill I/w Muiravonside

Let us come to God in prayer before we think about His word. Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit and soften our hearts to the word of God.

Come Holy Spirit and bind up our hearts and open our eyes.

Come Holy Spirit with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus' name.
Amen.

I wonder what are your earliest memories of church? What are your earliest memories of church? My own memories include going to church with my family, standing beside my dad, maybe even being held by my dad, and him singing the hymns out fairly loudly - which is probably where I get that habit from - I remember juice and biscuits after the service along the tables with other boys and girls, and just such a hubbub of conversation and activity there, I remember getting dressed smartly, I remember sitting with my Gran when we moved church. I don't really remember much of what the minister said, which hopefully won't be your experience today! I wonder what you remember? What your earliest memories of church are?

They could be very well tied-in with this building. These memories we are fond of. Many of them are good and they make a lasting impression upon us. These memories probably shape our view of what church is about and of what church means to us. For most of my early life I probably associated church with these memories. It was about going to a building, it was about doing certain things, it was about wearing certain things.

But then, at the age of 19, I became a Christian. That was when my faith became truly alive and real to me. Up to that point I believed in God but that belief made very little difference to my everyday life. In fact, life was becoming more and more selfish such that during my teenage years I was hurting others around me as a result. But then came a crisis moment and I came to truly know Jesus and not only did I change, but my understanding of church did as well.

In our passage today we see a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, and in that passage Jesus says 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again'. Then later he says 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. No one can see, whoever believes.

Jesus is not simply teaching moral truths and spiritual truths, he's talking about people, he's not talking about an organization or a building or a place. Jesus is talking about people.

And that's because the church is made of people. Jesus came to earth, He came to die on a cross for people, people like you and me. The church is made of people and we know this, we know this because we sing this. Do you remember the song:
'I am the church. You are the church. We are the church together.

The church is not a building. The church is not a steeple. The church is not a resting place.

The church is a people.'

The church is made of people. It's why Jesus came to die. It's why His resurrection is important because His resurrection proves there is hope for people, for people like you and me.

I know we know this. I realize it sounds like something from Sunday School but have we followed through the logic of what this means? It means the church is broader than us, the church is broader than here. There is, in fact, no them and us. There is only the church.

As a result, this means we have a great security and we have belonging. We don't just belong to Muiravonside or Blackbraes & Shieldhill Parish Church. There is a place for us in any church and every church should stand in solidarity with one another, across congregations, across boundaries, even across continents. Isn't that what we see when we pray for the persecuted church. So many of our brothers and sisters persecuted for their faith and yet we join in prayer for them and we don't care what ethnicity they are, we don't care what nationality they are, we don't care what denomination they are, we simply pray for them. We join in prayer across all man-made boundaries for our brothers and sisters in Christ because the church is made of people. That's why Jesus came. That was the purpose of His mission and His passion. This means we belong to something bigger. We actually have a greater security than we may ever have realized.

But is the church made up of just anybody? Or, let me put it another way, how can someone be part of the church?

Do we become part of the church by attending? Do we become part of the church by giving or becoming a member?

I think we probably all bring assumptions to our faith. We all do. And the same was true in Jesus' day as well. And the same was true of Nicodemus. We read of Nicodemus in verse one 'Now there was a pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.' As a pharisee he obeyed the strictest of rules, he sought to honor God in every way imaginable, he wanted to know exactly how to apply God's law, and he followed those rules very strictly. He was for this, highly esteemed. He would be seen as a truly righteous man and through years of study and self-application, he has gained a position on the Jewish ruling council. Nicodemus has ticked all the boxes. He assumes his place in God's family and kingdom. He assumes he is in; he is safe.

But as the dialogue shows, we can assume the wrong things, we can trust the wrong things and by doing that, we gain a false sense of security.

And what Jesus says, He helps Nicodemus to see things more rightly and to see where he can find life and hope and so Jesus says 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the

kingdom of God unless they're born again.' He goes on to say 'just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'

Jesus is saying that life is to be found in Him. We are to trust in Jesus. It is this that qualifies someone to be in the kingdom or not, to be in the church or not, to believe in Jesus, to trust in Jesus is what ultimately allows us to belong or not, to His church because the church is made of people who trust in Jesus.

I wonder friends, is that where your trust is? Or have we trusted in other things?

Have we maybe trusted in the denomination, in its strength and size, and its legacy? Have we trusted in the building? That as long as the building's here, as long as the walls stay up, and the roof is intact, everything will be okay? Have we maybe derived a false sense of security from these, just like Nicodemus? And as the future of these things that we've put our trust in seems more uncertain, have we responded like Nicodemus does to Jesus? Twice Nicodemus says 'How?' 'How?' 'How can this be?'

And maybe you're asking the same question with all the uncertainty you face because your trust is not in Jesus, it's been in something else, you've assumed the wrong things.

So, maybe this Easter season, maybe in this journey towards the cross anew this year, maybe amidst all you're facing, God's invitation is for you to trust Jesus more deeply, to trust Jesus more truly, maybe even to trust Jesus for the first time, not so that you can get your own way, not so that everything will be okay, but, as you trust in Jesus, you might find a greater peace and hope and joy, even in the darkest of times.

For a number of reasons these past few weeks, I've been reminded of the story and life of Corrie Ten Boom and if you don't know her story then at the end of April, Brightons is hosting a production of her story called 'The hiding place' which is based upon the book of the same title 'The hiding place'. I encourage you to get a copy of the book or to join us down at Brightons for that production at the end of April and we'll let you know of more details. Corrie Ten Boom was a Dutch Christian and in her young adult life experienced World War II, her herself, her sister and her dad were in fact taken by the Nazis to concentration camps because they helped Jews escape from the Nazis. And her story speaks of how it is possible to keep trust in Jesus even in the darkest of times, even in the horror of such circumstances.

Corrie didn't always trust perfectly, her sister did more often actually, and it was her sister's influence that helped shape Corrie, helped strengthen Corrie, helped refine Corrie's trust herself. And Corrie lived through that when her sister and father did not and she would go on to inspire many others to trust in Jesus, to trust in the way of Jesus, and to see the church grow. Because the church is made of people who trust in Jesus. And I wonder friends, does that describe you?

But maybe you're wondering 'Well, what kind of trust are we talking about? Is this a kind of trust where you just grit your teeth and get through to the end? Is it a kind of trust where you're simply holding on and you're simply fulfilling duty? I'm not sure it is, and it's certainly not that kind of trust that got Corrie Ten Boom through her experience either. It was something other than duty, it was something other than just sheer doggedness and sheer human strength, it was something other, it was something of which Jesus spoke about in our passage today where he says 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son.' For God so loved the world.

If the church is made of people and those people have come from the world to believe in Jesus, to trust in Jesus, then do you know what that means? The church is made of people loved by God as well. The church is made of people loved by God.

I wonder friends, do we know that? Do we believe it? Have we received it for ourselves? Do we actually know that God is for us, for you personally?

He's proven it. He's proven it to the greatest degree he possibly can. He sent His one and only son to die for us. God is for us.

Now, it can be hard to hold on to that in a broken world with all that is going on and all that is changing in our world and in our local context. It is said that in our day we are in a grey zone, a period of time between the eras when things are changing, when things are in flux when the world as we know it is disappearing before our eyes. Being in that grey zone is unsettling, it is disorientating, it is scary. I'm sure you feel it like I do as well.

And maybe God's invitation this Easter is to perceive His love more fully and to receive His love more deeply.

As we journey towards Easter together, reflecting on the cross, reflecting on the reasons that Jesus came and the purpose of His passion, may we see the love God has for us. May we see the depth and height and breadth and length of the love of God for you, not just for the world, but for you. For you.

I encourage you please, to try and make the time between now and Easter to dig into God's word, to meet with Him in prayer. Maybe you can invest some time reading through the Gospel of John, maybe read a bit of a chapter a day or one chapter a day, whatever you feel you can manage. That through this gospel, this gospel where we find such truths as we've seen today, you can grow in your knowledge of God's love, you can grow in your appreciation of God's love, a love that drove Him to send His one and only Son into the world, to die on a cross for you, for you. Because, ultimately, that's why Jesus came, that was the purpose of His passion. It was the reason for His journey to the cross, to have a church, a church made of people, a group of people who trust in Him, and know the love of God.

May we be such a people now and all our days come what may. I pray it may be so. Amen.