

Year A Proper 26 St James

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

Philippians 2:1-13

Matthew 21: 23-32

Hear What the Spirit is Saying to the Church

I have chosen to give this sermon the title of the response we use after the readings from the OT and Epistle readings. 'Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.' This is a quote from Revelation 2:29 and 3:22.

Let us turn to our readings. In our reading from Philippians Paul is advocating that Christians serve others.

Paul says (v4) 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.' Paul asks us to follow Christ's example of humility. Verse 5 says 'Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus'. Paul tells us that this is the way to salvation.

I want to make two brief points about this.

From the perspective of creationtide and the climate emergency this passage brings in to sharp and uncomfortable focus that the interest of others means we need to change our current ways of living. Humankind has transgressed at least four planetary boundaries: those of climate change, land conversion, nitrogen and phosphorus loading, and biodiversity loss.

The concentration of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere now far exceeds the safe limit of 350 parts per million (ppm); it is now over 400 ppm and despite a considerable reduction in human activity during COVID19 lockdown across the industrialised world, CO² emissions are still rising. This will result in a hotter and more hostile environment, along with rises in sea level threatening coastal cities across the world.

The scale of biodiversity loss is severe. Species extinction is occurring ten times faster than scientists deem 'natural'. There are only 50%, half of the number of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, and fish worldwide than there were 50 years ago. A drop in numbers by 50% over 50 years. (Raworth: p52)

A reminder that v4 states, 'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.' Those others include people across the world today suffering the effects of the climate emergency. As our sisters and brothers, our neighbours, created in God's image, we have a duty to them, to love and care for them. Can we do that if we don't change our ways? In addition, our past lifestyles and our continuing lifestyles will impact on our children and even more so on their children over the next 30 to 50 years. We have to change our ways for their sake.

Secondly, looking at this from the perspective of our own lives today I want to say something about self-care. This last week it was six months since lockdown began. At the beginning it was difficult for many people to adjust, but the majority did. As the regulations and restrictions loosened up we breathed a sigh of relief and, maybe unconsciously, consigned the lockdown to history. But now we face the prospect of something looking and feeling very much like lockdown, even if it has a different name so as to avoid calling it what in effect for many people it will be. This has had a considerable negative impact on the wellbeing of many many people. I have spoken to members of the congregation, other dog walkers on my daily perambulations with Jep, and other priests. Whilst many have hope, they also are feeling and acknowledge a sense of demotivation, some of feelings of heightened anxiety, some levels of melancholy and depression. The prospect of long dark nights adds to the sense of isolation, and with worse weather, getting outside will be a struggle for some.

'Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.' Paul's passage is a timely reminder that when we are feeling down, one of the best ways to help us get to a better place with our mental health is to make a small gesture of kindness to someone else. By making a commitment to helping someone else you will help yourself. Those who report a greater interest in helping others are more likely to rate themselves as happy. Those who make an effort to contact and talk to others, including other people who are finding life difficult, report as being happier and more content. It doesn't have to be marathon calls every day, that will just exhaust you. A fifteen-minute chat once or twice a week can make all the difference to yourself and to the other person. In looking to the interests of others, you will also improve your own wellbeing.

In our gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus is once again being tested and questioned by the chief priests and elders in the temple. They challenge his authority. We know that some of their attitude and behaviour is driven because of their privileged position. They fear this man. He could turn their comfy existence on their heads and what they taught was very different from the teachings of Jesus. Their teachings supported the status quo. Their own positions of comfort, power, authority and privilege were at risk. The chief priests and elders invested a lot of their efforts to get to the position they now had, and they were going to resist anything that could change that. They narrow self-interests strongly favoured of the status quo.

Jesus points out to them that others, people the chief priests and elders despised – including tax collectors and prostitutes amongst them - had heard the radical message from Jesus and had changed. They genuinely believed in Him and his message, his description of the kingdom of heaven that could come down to earth if only people would change.

Isn't it so human to latch on to the people we despise, or we can attach a disparaging label to, as a reason not to follow a course of action? The young people of the Extinction Rebellion – many of them who dress differently from us and use unorthodox means to get their urgent message across – can make it easy for us to disassociate with them, and crucially their message. But the important point here is that these people have read the science, and have changed their lives. So we may talk about climate change, we can read books and discuss them, but is the church taking any sort of lead? Are the majority of our congregations taking any action? Or are we a bit like the chief priests and elders? Have we invested so much in our lifestyles, do we love our lifestyles more than our neighbours, have we got so used to our lifestyles that we want to hold on to the status quo even if it goes against the teachings of Jesus to love our neighbour?

As a congregation it is uncomfortable to acknowledge that change is a constant. Change is happening all around us. If we want to hold on to what is familiar, if we want to hold on to our old ways, ways that desecrate God's creation, we will lose any credibility with the generation that is in their teens just now. I strongly believe that individually and collectively we need to change, and act in ways that show our commitment as good stewards of the God's creation. We can support each other in exploring what changes we can make. And to be blunt, some of the changes we need to make have a cost –

some are not monetary costs but the personal cost of investing in changing habits and behaviours: In finding products that reduce plastic (toothpaste tubes in jars, bars of shampoo and soap, loose fruit and veg, etc); in using a 'refillery' such as the one in the Penicuik Storehouse so plastic containers we do have are reused and we don't buy more; in planning our days better to reduce short car journeys, etc. Some may have a cost – I use a utility company that charges me slightly higher than the best rate I could have got, but I know the money pays for carbon-offsetting of my gas consumption.

What is it that you can do?

At the end of our Gospel reading, Jesus says to the Chief Priests and elders, 'For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax-collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

'...even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him'.

I suggest we are at this point with regard to the climate emergency. We have seen what is the right way to be good stewards of God's creation. Some have changed their minds and believe, and having changed their minds have adopted a different life style. I don't want the teenagers of today in twenty or thirty years time to be able to state with full justification, '...even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him'.

I started this sermon by saying I have given it the title, 'Hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church'. That is the challenge for each one of us, as individuals and as a community of faith here in Penicuik. Each of us has to decide what we discern the Holy Spirit is calling us to do, calling us to change in our lives, so through our actions we can show love of our neighbour and love of God's wonderful creation. For we all stand on Holy ground, no matter where we are.

I ask you to please, hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church...

Nick Bowry

27th September 2020

References:

<https://www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health/self-help-and-wellbeing/five-ways-to-better-mental-health>

Raworth, K (2017) *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to think Like a 21st Century Economist*. Penguin Random House. London.