

Trinity Sunday St James June 12th, 2022

Jn 16 v 13 'When he the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth----he will tell you what is to come'.

In days and weeks following our celebration of Pentecost, we are reminded of the way that faith in Jesus spread from northwards and westwards like a highly contagious virus. Unlike Covid, faith in Jesus was a something people were glad to be infected by: it made them whole, restoring health rather than sapping it. How times have changed! You will all remember how the nation hung on the latest calculations of the infamous 'R' number at the height of the COVID pandemic. The 'R' number measured how rapidly the virus was spreading: values greater than one were bad news because they indicated that for every person now infected there would be > 1 infected tomorrow. Values < 1 were good news, because the number of cases was falling. A statistician based at the University of South Wales, John Hayward, was tasked with using the same model to predict church populations and the outcomes are startling. Based on church attendance figures between 2000-2020 and beginning with the local Church in Wales (CiW), he calculated an 'R' value of 0.78. (Note that values > 1 are good news and values < 1 bad news in the church growth context, the opposite of the case when modeling infections). John calculated and that the established church in Wales would disappear by 2040.

Hayward also calculated 'R' values for 15 other denominations and I was shocked by some outcomes. To my surprise, the Church of England (CoE) and Roman Catholic church were shrinking more slowly, with R values around 0.9 but were still predicted to be extinct by 2090. There was some good news: Elim Pentecostalists and newcomers like churches in the New Frontiers conglomerate (e.g. Hope and City of God) were growing and the United Reform Church (URC) and Methodists might see in the next century! But what of our beloved SEC, the church in which Hayward himself came to faith? SEC had a lower 'R' value than CiW,

0.65, and was likely to become extinct by 2038, having waved good bye to our brothers & sisters in the Church of Scotland a few years earlier.

When I told my younger daughter, Theresa, a GP in Aberdeen, that I was thinking of passing on this information in a sermon this morning, she said “Be careful not to dishearten, everyone!” She was suggesting that I watched my ‘pulpit-side manner’, the way GP’s had to watch their bedside manner. Not that we see many GP’s at our bedside these days. General practice also has an infectivity crisis, with an ‘R’ number < 1. Young medical graduates are not grabbed by prospects of long hours, much of it spent filling in forms and are not entering general practice fast enough to replace those leaving or retiring. Theresa trains young doctors and was advised to introduce her trainees to the concept of “Marginal Gains’ and use a motivational presentation by Sports Broadcaster, Matthew Syed: designed to recruit more young doctors to General Practice and hold on to them (to view, the link is <https://youtu.be/-E3pCeUAplo>). Matthew suggested that marginal gains can change the world; if enough people make small improvements, each insignificant by itself, there is gradual improvement. With old and new GPs prepared to make small changes, the long-terms prospects for all GPs could be improved and the R value increased. The idea that major benefits can accrue through a multitude of small increments is not new: it can be traced back to Lao Tzu, ancient Chinese philosopher and founder of Taoism, who is supposed to have said this:

‘A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step.’

Team dynamics were also important: knowing that others were taking small steps, hearing about them and sharing experiences.

Taking my daughters advice, I invited the congregation to sing a motivational song about small steps, “Let there be peace on earth’: the words run as follows;

Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.

Let there be peace on Earth, The peace that was meant to be.

With God our Creator, we’re one family.

Let us walk with each other, in perfect harmony.

Let peace begin with me, let this be the moment now.
With ev'ry step I take, let this be my solemn vow:
To take each moment and live each moment
in peace eternally.
Let there be Peace on Earth, and let it begin with me.

A fortnight ago, Nick urged us to participate in the CoE's 'Thy Kingdom Come' initiative, an intense period of prayer and evangelism with individual targets of bringing five people 'to the faith': if accomplished, this would give St James an 'R' value of 5 and would see us having to extend the church next year! The project is important because it is a rare attempt to reverse the current decline in church attendance but looking around the congregation this morning, I don't think the Fabric Committee need abandon summer holiday plans and I suspect that a similar position holds throughout most of the SEC and CoE congregations!

It may be premature to write off the project as a failure but, rather than get downhearted, we could analyse the project in the light of the 'Marginal Gains' approach as a matter of urgency to see if there are reasons why it might be failing. The plan was certainly no small step and felt more like a giant leap from the status quo. I don't think it contained a team component, instead relying on God, through prayer, to coordinate matters. I would even say there were elements of arrogance and complacency in the plan. Canterbury was asking us to recruit adherents to a faith brand that Dr Hayward's modelling showed to be decidedly uncontagious; like one of the Covid variants or mutations that are minimally infective and on the way out. The unchurched are largely resistant and immune to the Anglican strain of faith.

Had we brought along five friends along to St James this Trinity Sunday, they would have struggled to understand our collect and we might have struggled ourselves to explain over coffee why the concept of a Holy

Trinity was so important: it may be bread and butter to us but a crusty loaf for the uninitiated to digest!

There are four* small steps we might we take in the near future to increase our chances of St James surviving into the next century.

1. Having baulked at the prospect of asking **five** friends to sample your faith, it would be a much smaller step to ***casually ask one friend why they didn't come to church*** (or even if they believed in God) and then share responses. This is essentially the way that Jesus' mission started, except that the disciples were asked to approach strangers, not friends, and worked in pairs (Mt 6 v7).

2. Look and learn from the churches that are growing. They are less formulaic in their worship and less reliant on ordained clergy, be they UR, Methodists or Elim Pentecostals. Are there small things we can we trim from our current practices that might make our fellowship more appealing (i.e. 'infectious')?

3. Look for a Unique Selling Point. The more successful churches are not all the same. The United Reform Church (URC) is 'minimalist' rather than fundamentalist when it comes to doctrine and the authority of scripture: URC appeals to quizzical seekers for truth. Worshipping in one of Penicuik's five Elim-like churches in 2050 is not a prospect that would appeal to me, should I reach the ripe old age of 112!

4. Above all, let the love of God, as witnessed in Jesus and spread by His spirit, a Holy Trinity in all but name, enfold not just us but the whole community. As we heard in our epistle (Romans 5 v 5) 'Hope does not disappoint, because God has poured his love into our hearts by his Holy Spirit'.

Neville

**Since delivering the sermon, I looked up an earlier research paper by the researcher*

(Hayward, J., 2005; A general model of church growth and decline. Journal of Mathematical Sociology). In it, he notes the need for congregations to have 'enthusiasts' in their number to grow: these are equivalent to 'superspreaders' of a virus. We could look for such individuals in our midst and, if none are found, train some up with a customised programme rather than an 'off the shelf' Anglican or Diocesan plan.