

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 24 May 2009, Kilcalmonell, Killean & Kilchenzie

6th Sunday after Easter

induction of an elder in Killean & Kilchenzie

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

(Before the service in Killean & Kilchenzie the Kirk Session is constituted)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'The Lord of heaven confess' (CH 104)

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'Be still' (CH 189)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Readings : Exodus 19:1-11 & John 17:14-26 (*Good News Bible*)

Hymn : 'The God of Abraham praise' (CH 162: 2, 3, 4)

Yesterday's General Assembly meeting

Yesterday evening, after 4 hours of debate, the General Assembly decided with a 59 votes majority to sustain the call from Aberdeen Queen's Cross on Rev Scott Rennie. Almost a third of the commissioners did not cast a vote. Personally I feel the General Assembly made the right decision, because every parish must have the right to call a minister of its own choice. But we still have a long way to go before the underlying issues are fully resolved.

The problem always seems to be: sex. Over the past decades the vast majority of Church of Scotland members has silently left behind the Westminster Confession, decided for themselves what they do and do not believe, made up their own minds in ethical matters, the Church of Scotland itself came to denounce weapons of mass destruction, its ministers descended from their old pedestals – but apart from some grumbling we basically got on with it. However, once it is about sex, or if sex can be used as an excuse, the flames still rise high – almost to heaven.

Now the last thing I want, is to tell you what to think about matters of sexuality. You would not take that from me either, I expect. As a minister I do have something to teach about how we should and should not read the Bible, but this is not the moment for that. Instead let me just mention some facts.

In medical science, biology and psychology homosexuality is regarded as a normal variety, not as a disease or abnormality. Of course you will be able to find doctors who will tell the opposite, like there still are doctors who say that smoking does not hurt you and even geographers who believe the earth is flat (I'm not joking). Usually it is estimated that about 6-10% of the British population will be homosexual. Well, Kintyre has some 12,000 inhabitants, so we are talking about 720-1,200 people,

and we may know them. If you think you never met them, it might be because many rather hide their identity than run the risk of being targeted by random others. In Glasgow you can still be beaten up on Saturday night, simply for being gay. These are facts.

As I said, you are totally entitled to have your own opinions. However, as Christians and as church members we are bound to the new commandment Jesus has given: to love each other as he loves us. It clearly is unloving to deny somebody's sexual identity, even if we find it difficult to accept it. It is equally unloving to simply allow any sexual behaviour, for example if it is abusive, non consensual, or not within a loving relationship. We should never accept that. The commandment to keep our love true, pure and fair, obliges all of us, regardless of our sexual identity, regardless whether we do or do not live in a relationship.

So my message is: unloving behaviour towards others, and especially towards those who are a minority, is unacceptable in a Christian community. Having said that, I am open for any request to discuss the subject more in-depth, to explain how we should read the Bible etc.

One more thing. Over the past few months, and especially during last week, the church has seen a huge row over gay partnerships. In the same period across the globe ten thousands lost their job, many people struggled with their mortgage, hundreds of girls and young women were trafficked, and the Irish church was confronted with a scathing report on child abuse. Just to say that sex is not the world's first priority.

I hope that what I have said can be of some help for you.

Sermon

Today from the Bible we read two fundamental passages. From Exodus the story about the people of Israel gathering at Mount Sinai where Moses will receive God's commandments, the Torah. And from John's Gospel a part of Jesus' prayer for his followers before he completed his journey to the cross. How do these two passages connect and explain each other?

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Israel is told how they have been carried on the wings of an eagle. That image is strong: just picture an eagle circling among the high cliffs where it has its nest, and the young ones learning to fly. They will jump from the nest but the parent is there to catch them if they fall, throw them upwards again, until they can use their own wings.

For Israel God's care and liberation is mirrored by the covenant and the commitment to be God's chosen people. As Israel soon learned, and as the Jewish people today still know, having a covenant and being chosen comes at a cost. That cost is: to *do* what God says. It is important to read carefully if we want to understand this.

First of all the people promise to *do* what God commands. Even before they have heard any commandment, they make this commitment. Until this very day that is a most fundamental awareness in Judaism: first you act, you do what is right. The tree will be known by its fruits. This is why Jesus spoke about the fruits of love as being the

most important thing, as we have read last Sunday.

After that God speaks to Moses, saying that he wants to descend and enable the people to *hear* him. All the words of religion, revelation and liberation come *after* the corresponding acts. First there is faith, as a basic trust and an experience of awe, after that religion can try to voice and communicate it. First there is teaching and learning, then, through doing it, mysteries are revealed. First you make yourself and others free from slavery, after that you can talk of liberation.

Finally, as a bonus, God even plans to make the people see him on Mount Sinai. Actually that will not happen. This is a strong message: all we have about God are the commitment of *doing* what is right and *hearing* the words as the Bible has collected them. But we will most likely not see anything. There is a Jewish saying that says, you don't have to believe in God, as long as you do what he says. It shows how important it is to *be doers of the Word and not merely hearers*, as the apostle James wrote.¹

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According to John Jesus prayed for the unity of his followers. In Latin the words are *ut omnes unum sint* – very important words in the history of the ecumenical movement! Yet, it seems that unity is the one thing the church has always lacked from the moment the emperor Constantine made christianity the official religion. Excommunication, persecution and inquisition, Great Schism, Reformation and Covenanters – it all shows a striking lack of unity.

Well, that depends. If you define 'unity' as 'uniformity', sure. Uniformity has never ever been there. The prophets of Israel deeply disagreed with the priests in the temple; Jesus sometimes agreed but more often disagreed with the Pharisees; the apostles soon needed a council in Jerusalem to sort out a few fundamental differences; the four Gospels are distinctly different, and ever since multiformity has ruled. If parts of the Church of Scotland are having strong discussions today, it's nothing new. So, unity is *not* uniformity.

Then what is unity? Something esoteric? Some lofty vision that will never be realised? To some extent: yes.

Unity is: to find a common drive, regardless the differences in outcome. Unity is a dynamic thing and the opinions we form or the positions we take are always relative.

In my second parish there had been a merge between a pretty traditional reformed and a far more liberal Netherlands reformed congregation. I was born and bred in the traditional reformed part. At the point when I came to that parish, I was a minister in the Netherlands reformed church. When I visited a very old and very liberal lady, she said, 'I've heard you are reformed.' 'Right now I am Netherlands reformed,' I answered. 'I don't believe much of that,' she said. In the conversation it was quite clear

¹ James 1:22 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

that we came from different backgrounds and neither of us changed opinions. But at the end she said, 'We may be different, minister, but we stand on the same foundation.' That is unity.

Another example. When I studied theology we were active members of the local environmental campaign group. We tried to make the city council change its mind on the kind of wood they would allow for building and the concept of a cycling network. Our natural allies in the council were of course in the left-wing socialist party. But to our surprise the most committed support came from a conservative christian party. They decided to read their bible anew and came to the conclusion that God wants us to care for the environment. And, another surprise, we also found out that the Women's Guild was also a good supporter. (They said, 'We will *tell* our husbands.')

That too is unity.

Unity never is some kind of spiritual free haven, some peaceful island far away from the world. Jesus clearly says that his followers are and have to be *in this world*.² While they are actively working in this world, they need to stay rooted in God. Because being rooted in God will enable them to be truly human, faithful co-creators, realistic renewers, peacemakers.

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Spiritually unity comes through keeping to the teachings of Jesus, which will *graft us in the root* of Israel, as Paul wrote to the Romans.³ Jesus' teaching is to love each other, to do justice in this world, to trust in God. In the first place that is about the things we do or don't. In doing right, in loving, in teaching and learning we can hear Word of God – and perhaps we may even, just once and in a flash, see something of that kingdom to come. Unity is a spiritual category, but it can only grow on practical action.

To follow Jesus is to follow *the Way*,⁴ but that way has many tracks to suit our different itineraries through life. Actually, to follow the Way of Jesus, we will all have to find our own way. That requires trial and error, discussion, struggle and even fight. It is equally about cooperation, joy and grace. Unexpected helpers and strange guides will come to our aid, and sometimes we will need to leave things and people behind. Painful, yes. But this is how we build unity.

The orthodox way of building unity often comes down to force uniformity. That is why the Confessions were written: to bring people together under a uniform doctrine. But the sheer fact that there are so many different confessions reveals that true unity is far wider. In a way the church, also the Church of Scotland, has learned that, but when conflicts appear, it is so tempting to return to old formulas that seem to be rock-solid. Unfortunately that is self-deceit. The only certainty we have is that we need to keep moving along the path Jesus shows us. *The road goes ever on and on...*⁵ Basically

² John 17:15, 18.

³ Romans 11:17ff (*New Revised Standard Version*).

⁴ Acts 9:1f, a.o.p.

⁵ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord Of The Rings* (Hammersmith: HarperCollins, 2003 [=edition 1968]); this is the

because the world does.

I sincerely wish that we do this together: finding our own different ways in order to follow the Way of Jesus in unity. Not to reach religious enlightenment, but to make this world a wee bit better, just slightly more loving, and because of that far more beautiful.

*Still round the corner they may wait
A new road or a secret gate;
And though I oft have passed them by,
A day will come at last when I
Shall take the hidden paths that run
West of the Moon, East of the Sun.*⁶

Amen.

Hymn : 'God of freedom, God of justice' (CH 263)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

(In Killean & Kilchenzie the Induction follows)

Introduction

Promise

(to elder:)

Do you believe
the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith;
do you promise
to seek the unity and peace of this Church;
to uphold its doctrine, worship,
government and discipline;
and to take your due part
in the administration of its affairs?
I DO.

(Elder signs the Formula)

Prayer

Declaration and Welcome

(Kirk Session members give the right hand of fellowship)

Renewing of Commitment

Christ calls us all to share in his ministry.

first line of the 'Road Song', which has three different versions, i.e. Bilbo's original (I,i: A Long-expected Party, p35), Bilbo's last version (VI,vi: Many Partings, p965) and Frodo's version (VI,ix: The Grey Havens, p1005).

⁶ Frodo's version.

Let us, then, renew our commitment to his service.

(to all present:)

Members and elders of this congregation:
do you commit yourselves
to love and serve God's Church and Kingdom?
WE DO.

(to the congregation:)

Members of this congregation:
do you encourage and support your elders,
surround them with your love,
and remember them in your prayers?
WE DO.

(to the elders:)

Elders of this parish:
do you promise to carry out all your duties
faithfully and cheerfully, God being your helper?
WE DO.

Prayer

Closing Hymn : 'Son of God, eternal Saviour' (CH 468)

Blessing

*(After the service in Killean & Kilchenzie the congregation welcomes the new elder,
and the Kirk Session resumes and closes its meeting)*