

## MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 9 August 2009, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

*10<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost*

*preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff*

*hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005) / Songs of God's People (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)*

---

### Welcome & Intimations

**Opening Hymn** : 'In the name of Christ we gather' (CH 677)

### Children's Talk

**Children's Hymn** : 'The church is wherever God's people are praising' (CH 522)

### Prayer & Lord's Prayer

**Readings** : 1 Samuel 9:1-2, 10:1a, 15:34-35 (*Good News Bible*)& Matthew 18:1-19:1 (*new translation*<sup>1</sup>)

*[Matthew 18:1-19:1 :]*

<sup>1</sup> *At that time his followers come to Jesus, saying,*

*'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'*

<sup>2</sup> *and having called a child to him, he places it in their midst,*

<sup>3a</sup> *and he says:*



<sup>3b</sup> *For sure, I say to you, lest you turn around and become like a child,  
you will never go into the kingdom of heaven;*

<sup>4</sup> *therefore, whoever makes himself as low as this child,  
is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven;*

<sup>5</sup> *and whoever welcomes one such child,  
welcomes me;*

<sup>6</sup> *but whoever makes one of these little ones who believe in me, stumble,  
it is better for him that an upper millstone is hung around his neck  
and [that] he is drowned in the depth of the sea.*

<sup>7</sup> *Woe to the world for the stumbling-blocks,*

*for it may be necessary that stumbling-blocks come,*

*but more woe to the person by whom the stumbling-block comes;*

<sup>8</sup> *and if your hand or your foot makes you stumble,  
cut it off and throw it from you;*

*it is better for you to go into life crooked or crippled,*

*than, having two hands or two feet, being thrown into the everlasting fire;*

<sup>9</sup> *and if your eye makes you stumble,  
take it out and throw it from you;*

---

<sup>1</sup> A colometric-concordant translation. See: F.H. Breukelman, *Bijbelse theologie. I,1 Schrift-lezing*. Een verhandeling over de kolometrische weergave van bijbelse teksten als hulp bij het lezen en als grondslag voor de exegese (Kampen: Kok, 1980) – probably a good reason to learn Dutch. Some information about colometry, as distinguished from stichometry, in classical texts was already in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition (1910 pass.), now on [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colometry). More can be found in: Bruce M. Metzger, *Manuscripts Of The Greek Bible. An Introduction to Greek Palæography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), which is on [Google Books](https://books.google.com/books) now.

it is better for you to go one-eyed into life,  
than, having two eyes, being thrown into the 'gehenna' of the fire.



10 See to it that you do not despise one of these little ones,  
for I say to you:

in heaven their messengers always watch the face of my father in heaven.

11 <sup>2</sup> *[For the son of man comes (to find and) to save what was lost.]*

12 What do you assume?

if someone happens to have a hundred sheep

*[cf. Ezek. 34:6,12,16;*

and one of them goes astray,

*Ps. 119:176]*

will he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountain

and, having gone out, seek for the one that went astray?

13 and if it happens that he finds it,

for sure, I say to you,

that he rejoices over it, more than over the ninety-nine that did not go astray.

14 Thus it is not the will behind<sup>3</sup> your father in heaven

that one of these little ones would be lost.



15 If your brother does wrong [to you],

go and show him his fault between you and him alone;

*[cf. Lev. 19:17]*

if he hears you, you have gained your brother;

16 if he does not hear you, bring one or two along with you,

that *by the mouth of two or three witnesses every saying shall stand;*

*[= Deut. 19:15]*

17 if he does not want to hear, you must say it to the congregation;

if he does not want to hear the congregation either,

he shall be to you as the foreigner and the tax collector.

18 For sure, I say to you,

whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven,

and whatever you untie on earth, will be untied in heaven;

19 again, [for sure,] I say to you,

if two of you speak in unison about anything on earth that you ask for,

it will happen to them through my father in heaven;

20 for where two or three are gathering,

in my name I will be there in their midst.

21 Then, coming closer, Peter says to him,

---

<sup>2</sup> This is an issue of textual criticism. The standard text of the Greek New Testament (*Novum Testamentum Graece*, ed. Nestle-Aland<sup>27</sup>) omits verse 11, which appears to be borrowed from Lk. 19:10. Most Greek witnesses for Mt. have it included – notably the Majority Text (Ⲛ, 5<sup>th</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> century), and also the Codex Bezae (D, 5<sup>th</sup> century) and others – however, the most authoritative witnesses, including the Codex Sinaiticus (Ⲛ, 4<sup>th</sup> century) and the Codex Vaticanus (B, 4<sup>th</sup> century), as well as the Kirsopp Lake minuscules (f<sup>1,13</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> century) do not. The Codex Regius (L, 8<sup>th</sup> century) has the verse inserted in the margin – also adding two words, apparently to accord with Lk. 19:10 (here indicated by brackets) – while the verse was originally omitted. The conclusion is, that if we decide to read this verse, it should be considered as a later addition. Hence the square brackets and italics in this translation.

<sup>3</sup> Or: in front of.

'Lord, how often will my brother do wrong to me and I forgive him<sup>4</sup>?  
As many as seven times?'

22 Jesus says to him,

'I do not say to you as many as seven times,  
but as many as seventy times.'

[cf. Gen. 4:24]



23 Because of this, the kingdom of heaven is like a king  
24 who wants to settle accounts with his servants;  
25 and when he begins to settle one is brought to him,  
26 a debtor of ten thousand talents;  
27 and since he cannot give it back to him,  
28 the lord orders him to be sold, and his wife and his children and all he has,  
29 and makes him give it back;  
30 the servant then, falling down, kisses his feet, saying,  
31 'Have patience with me and I will give it all back to you';  
32 and, taking pity, the lord of this servant sends him away  
33 and he acquits<sup>5</sup> his debt;  
34 but, coming outside, this servant finds one of his fellow servants,  
35 who has a debt with him of hundred denarii,  
36 and, seizing him, he chokes him, saying,  
37 'Give back your debt';  
38 his fellow servant then, falling down, pleads with him,  
39 'Have patience with me and I will give it back to you';  
40 and he does not want to, but, having gone away, throws him into prison,  
41 until he could give back his debt;  
42 so his fellow servants, seeing what has happened, are deeply grieved,  
43 and, having gone, they make clear to their lord all that has happened;  
44 then his lord, having called him, says to him,  
45 'All these debts I have acquitted for you, because you pleaded with me;  
46 should you not have had mercy too on your fellow servant,  
47 as I have had mercy on you?  
48 and getting furious his lord hands him over to the prison guards  
49 until he could give back all of his debt.  
50 So also my father in heaven will do to you  
51 if you do not forgive<sup>6</sup> each your brother from from your heart.



1 *And it happens, when Jesus has completed these words,  
that he departs from Galilee;  
and he comes into the region of Judea beyond the Jordan.*



**Hymn** : 'Sing we a song of high revolt' (SoGP 96)

## Sermon

---

<sup>4</sup> Or: leave it behind.

<sup>5</sup> Or: leaves it out.

<sup>6</sup> Or: leave it behind.

Jesus has already taught us a lot through the lessons he teaches his followers. We have learned to start with blessings, the Beatitudes, to read our Bible again and again, and also how to pray, especially without too many words. Probably nothing of this was really new, but still it felt like new, certainly to me. Learning is not taking in a bit of information and then you have it available forever. Instead, learning is dynamic, it keeps changing, because the world does the same.

We have learned about mission as a down-to-earth main task for the church, and about parables as a way to see and hear differently. Throughout all of his lessons Jesus focusses us towards the kingdom of God: the good life on earth as it reflects its heavenly origin; human life as a living expression of justice, peace and wholeness. Mission is not a mission impossible to fill the church pews again, but a day-to-day way of life that helps us and others to find and enjoy God's goodness and beauty in and through creation.

–

Let me recall one of Jesus' words: *be as clever as serpents and as innocent as doves*.<sup>7</sup> With these words he sends out his followers, us included. It urges us to train ourselves to be as realistic as possible while at the same time to see and hear the living vision of God's kingdom. Being realistic – not to fly away on dreams that will not last. But moreover daring to dream – not to be smothered by the dullness of every day.

With both these skills in action Jesus proclaims God's kingdom as present and living among us. But what did his followers do with that? A century ago a French theologian wrote regretfully, 'Jesus announced the Kingdom, but it was the church that came.'<sup>8</sup> His church was not happy with that line. The honest professor lost his job and was excommunicated.

If we listen to Jesus' teaching with the innocence of doves, we can see the church as a living and loving community; a true fellowship of brothers and sisters; a clear example of justice, peace and wholeness in action; a place where God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven. All of this is possible, it does exist and it is happening – if we have the innocence to see and hear.

If we listen to Jesus' teaching with the cleverness of serpents, we will be urged to ask critical questions. What are people's true motives? Who is in power, and does not want to share that? Where is the money and who has a say about it? I was born a son of the manse and I have been actively involved in christian organizations for some forty years now. Let me mention just a few things I have come across somewhere along the line. (Rest assured, nothing about Kintyre – as yet.)

---

<sup>7</sup> Mt. 10:16.

<sup>8</sup> Alfred Loisy, *L'évangile et l'église* (Paris: Picard, 1902) p152 [English translation: *The Gospel And The Church* (London: Isbister, 1903)]. The original quote is 'Jésus annonçait le royaume, et c'est l'Eglise qui est venue'. Loisy is thought to have written this with some regret. This book caused him to lose his job as professor of theology and in 2008 he was also excommunicated. Brief information about Alfred Firmin Loisy in [Wikipedia](#).

- + It was so impressive to listen to this elder who knew more Bible quotes than my dear father – until one of the farm workers told how his colleague was paired off with the maid for £500 and a croft, but it was the pious elder who had made her pregnant.
- + We were so blessed with this financial expert taking care of our church's business – until we discovered that a few thousand pounds of the church account had magically disappeared.
- + It was touching to see how the new minister visited the grieving young widow at least twice a week – until the congregation found out that a marriage was urgently needed.
- + It was impressive to see this Session Clerk's commitment and devotion: nothing happened without him being involved – until the minister started to see that it was a clever way of having some power, since both the man's wife and his boss were very dominant.
- + It was really great to see how all these different people blended really well into this intentional christian community – although after some time it appeared to be an escape from mental problems for one member, a hiding place after bankruptcy for another, and a wonderful opportunity to prey on vulnerable people for yet another.

These are just some examples. Reading the news occasionally is enough to find many more: priests abusing children, nuns spending the religious order's money on cocaine and sexy underwear, famous preachers beating their wives and children. *I read the news today, oh boy...*

What have we got to do something about it? How can we find a way to be realistic and still live the dream? Jesus sends us out into the world, and as long as he does, we mainly have one tool to practice innocence and cleverness, idealism and realism. That tool is called 'the Church'.

–

Let's be clear: that French professor was right. Jesus announced the kingdom and he did not constitute a church. The church as we know it is man-made. In the words of one of my – very old – professors: 'The church is female – that is why it needs to be ruled by men.'

The true position of the church is like Israel and king Saul. It started with a great vision of Saul representing God's reign, but it ended in the harshness of reality – a battlefield. 'Oh, how the heroes have fallen.'

If Jesus says:

*whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven,  
and whatever you untie on earth, will be untied in heaven*

he is not endowing Peter with the superior terrestrial command. If the church claims that her authority and power is God-given, she is twisting the Gospel. The gospel is not about distributing powers in the same way this world would do. (But okay, using this theology at least one German managed to win the war by becoming pope...)

Jesus is not giving an outline of church discipline either, although what he says about the way conflicts should be dealt with, can be a useful basis for that. Still, discipline is just a set of rules we make ourselves.

–

As you can see, these so-called ‘Instructions to the Church’ are pretty confusing.

The first confusion begins with the translation of the Greek text. We read ‘church’, but the Greek word ‘ekklesia’, as a reflection of the Hebrew word ‘qahal’, means rather ‘congregation’. As Jesus says, *where two or three are gathering*. It is about the gathering of God’s people (which pope John XXIII strongly emphasized, by the way).

And there are more words that easily confuse us and push us into very churchy thinking. Most translations mention ‘sin’, ‘forgiving’, ‘hell’, ‘temptation’ or ‘offence’.<sup>9</sup> All of these words seems to be about religious and ethical failure, and about fear for divine punishment. Things you need a church for. But again, the translation is the first problem.

The word for ‘sin’ actually means ‘missing the mark’, like Wilhelm Tell missing that famous apple. Yes, the consequences can be fatal, but it still is about common things we do or don’t in daily life. It is about doing wrong, and also about wickedness.

The verb we translate with ‘to forgive’ is a very common verb, which basically means ‘to let go’, or ‘to send away’. Instead of a religious act of reconciliation it is about the wisdom and humility not to blame others for their faults. Because if we can avoid the blame game – remember Adam and Eve blaming each other about that apple – we have a better chance to restore a broken relation or situation.

Also ‘temptation’ or ‘offence’ is much more down-to-earth: the Greek word means ‘stumbling-block’. And that is just about the many tricks we use to be better off than our neighbour. It’s called competition, which in itself is not bad at all, but too easily gets twisted into tricks to make each other fall.

–

Now, in order to enable that grand vision of God’s kingdom to appear and work out, the church has two tools. To be fair, the church itself is a tool. She does not exist for any reason but to serve the world. As long as God’s plan with creation is not completed, the church is there as an auxiliary to work on it.

The two tools the church has for that is to foster forgiveness and to care for the little ones. Again, this is about common tasks in daily life in the first place. We do not need a theology of reconciliation, not even a committee. We need to *do* things, and more

---

<sup>9</sup> This is even aggravated by the insertion of verse 11 – *for the son of man comes (to find and) save what was lost* – in a number of translations, but this should be seen as a later addition.

important to *stop doing* other things.

To care for the little ones is about children and how we do or do not make them part of our communities, both secular and religious. Do we really value their curiosity, their honesty, their limited status and power? For once we do so, we will automatically apply that to other little ones: people without a great education, a splashy career, a sophisticated style. Believe me, once we really do that, we are starting a massive revolution.

To forgive is equally simple and impossible. Often when someone does us wrong, it festers in us. We get more and more hurt, and angry, and revengeful. Our world is stuffed with these kinds of conflicts on every level and scale, and it is obstructing communities all the time. The solution Jesus gives is simple: just let it go.

But how simple is that? It starts with the humble intention to let it go, but then quite some effort is needed. First of all – and it is essential to understand that – confession is needed. First we need to – as we say in Dutch – ‘name man and horse’. Both the wrong-doer and the one who was affected have to say what actually went wrong and who did so. Unless we manage to call evil evil and goodness goodness, we cannot let go. And the graver the wrong, the more painful and difficult that is. Thus we can never require someone to forgive us. And some deeds are practically unforgivable.

Jesus tells Peter he needs to forgive seventy times. That is the biblical number of all peoples on earth and the meaning is that forgiveness is possible everywhere on earth.

Caring for the little ones and training to forgive are the two tools the church has to work on God’s kingdom. And both are about what we do or do not do in daily life.

–

‘Instructions to the Church’. Actually that is what Jesus gives. As long as we don’t translate it into hierarchy, ordinations and doctrines that bind and bridle us. It is about the quality of congregations and the true intentions of the people.

With these words Jesus has completed his teachings in Galilee. Now he leaves for Judea, and that road will end on a hillock outside Jerusalem. The big question is if that end effectively ends all this talk of God’s kingdom. We know it doesn’t. But still we will need parables and teachings to see and hear that.

Amen.

**Hymn** : ‘Spirit of God, unseen as the wind’ (CH 600)

**Offering brought forward**

**Prayer of Intercession**

**Closing Hymn** : ‘Look forward in faith’ (CH 237)

**Blessing**