

MORNING SERVICE

Sunday 27 September 2009, Kilcalmonell, linked with Killean and Kilchenzie

17th Sunday after Pentecost

Ordination of Elders in Kilcalmonell

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

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

Welcome & Intimations

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

Children's Talk

Children's Hymn : 'Humbly in your sight' (CH 496)

Prayer & Lord's Prayer

Thanks be to God,
for good people around us,
for chocolate cake over coffee,
for simple songs that touch our heart,
for sun in the morning and rain in the afternoon,
for golden sunsets and starry skies,
for a meal when we need it,
for some drinks shared with friends,
for unselfish love.
For all these things we thank you, O God,
and we praise your Name.

And now as Jesus taught us, we pray:
Our Father...
...Amen.

Readings : Numbers 11:24-30 & Mark 9:38-42 (*Good News Bible*)

Hymn : 'Take this moment' (CH 501)

Sermon

I suppose you would be surprised, if not alarmed, if, after this service, your elders would gather outside and start speaking in tongues, having visions, giving brilliant lectures on biblical theology or dancing like darvishes. I think, either you would laugh out loud, or simply call an ambulance. Probably the latter.

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Yet, something like that seems to happen to the elders of Israel who are appointed by Moses to lead their people. In our translation they are called 'leaders', but that is

actually a bit too management-like. Moses hand-picked the most experienced among the elderly – which makes it even stranger that they behave as excited as they do.

In Israel, as in most civilized nations, older people were regarded to be the wisest. In our confused times we have turned that around: if you want to be a leader in the Western world, you should be young. According to this standard Gordon Brown is clearly too old – even 5 years older than me – while David Cameron or Nick Clegg have far less trouble in presenting themselves as the better choice for national leadership. (And of these Nick is the youngest, *and* his mum is Dutch, so guess what...?)

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But the fathers of the Reformation knew better. They invented a totally new ordination: the elder. No church in the world, except for those from the Protestant, and more particularly the Reformed, tradition has elders. And where did our forefathers discover this call? Exactly, in the Old Testament, with Israel's elders.¹ They were responsible for teaching the people God's commandments and for deciding on disputes that might occur. If we read about elders in the New Testament, it is still about this Old Testament picture. And neither should we forget that in the early church certainly women were much included as elders and preachers.

So if we want to learn about eldership, it is a story like the one we read today that would guide us towards a Reformed understanding. Moses was unable to lead all these 600,000 people of Israel on his own, so he appointed 70 helpers – the elders. The advice to do so, by the way, came from his father-in-law, Jethro, who was not even part of Israel.² Elders were Moses' extended arm, so to say.

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This picture was translated into Presbyterian church models: the ministers were to lead and the elders to co-lead. Some churches gave more responsibility to ministers, others placed the elders and deacons more at the centre. But the model was clear: all brought in their own gifts and together they were responsible for the well-being of the congregation.

The specialism of ministers is particularly the preaching (I know, some will never learn it...), while the elders have a pastoral responsibility for the people in their own district, and for the care of the church's goods. Teaching the children about the Bible and

¹ Often the figure of the elder is deducted from the New Testament figure of the *presbuteros*, but that is not correct. First, *presbuteros* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word *zaqeen*, which simply means 'old'. Secondly, the Greek also has another to refer to those of old age, i.e. *gerontes*. Thirdly, in the early church the *presbuteros* quickly became a priest-like figure, as expressed in the medieval Latin word *presbyter*. The 16th century invention of the elder as a lay person taking up office in the church was really a new thing, a revaluation of both age and laity. While in the New Testament it is not entirely clear what elders were and did in the church, the Reformation has formalised the role by making it an ordination.

² Exodus 18:13-26.

Christian faith is often a minister's task, but there have always been others who could specialise on that too. In the past usually the local schoolmaster took it up, and surely the Sunday School teachers did. In the Dutch churches the deacons have the special task of caring for the poor, the sick and the dying.

Now the risk is that ministers start to feel like wee Moseses, or elders behaving like Joshuas. That happens when they stop listening and love to hear their own voices too much, and people will notice it when conversations are no longer about understanding or sharing, but actually about power. But at the core of any call or ordination there should be a humble heart.

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There is no reason to feel that any office in the church descends straight from heaven. It's all human invention, and we should change it again if the time and place would urge us to. Nobody needs to be perfect to take up office in the church, and no ordination will ever make someone a saint. Moses receives the advise from someone outwith God's chosen people and today's story has even some hidden humour about the elders.

Jewish tradition³ notices that 70 is an odd number. All tribes should be equally represented and $12 \times 6 = 72$. Well, the explanation says, that's what happened. Moses did choose six from every tribe, because he was sure they would start a big fight if he would tell two tribes to send a man less. (It could have been the story of a church council election...) Then Moses made 72 slips of paper, on 70 of which he wrote 'elder' and two he left blank. So Eldad and Medad were the two who pulled the blank slips, and that was why they stayed in the camp.

When Eldad and Medad – the two who were not among the chosen ones, but whose names refer to the love of God and people – also started *to shout like prophets*, the boy reporting to Moses said, '*Stop them!*' Here too the Jewish explanation gives a very human twist to the words.⁴ One could also translate, 'Make them totally exhausted'. And how do you exhaust your elders? Simple: make them responsible for *all* the needs of the poor, the suffering and anyone else in the congregation, and before long they will perish.

This creative reading of the Torah, with a great attention for human vanity, teaches us a few things about elders and congregations. First that God is not too great or exalted to trust his people to rule themselves. Without any heavenly authorisation we are still capable enough to do that. Secondly, since we are only human, we should be realistic about our capacity to start a fight, or to escape from our own responsibility and leave everything to a few others. Thirdly, that not only the elders do the good work. When they solemnly gather in a religious place, still the Eldads and Medads are out there, *in the camp*, to bring God's love to the people.

³ That is [Rashi](#)'s commentary on Numbers 11:28, which can also be searched [on-line](#).

⁴ Rashi again. The Hebrew verb *kalah* means 'to complete', 'to end', but with a slightly different reading it can also mean 'be used up', 'be exhausted', 'perish'.

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Jesus seems to have this in mind when he corrects his beloved disciple John. Jesus explicitly tells him that it is not about who does or does not belong to the inner circle of chosen people, but about simple deeds of mercy, like giving someone a cup of water. Congregations have their inner circle of minister and elders, but it is about the wider circle of all members, and even about the still wider circle of a whole parish. Any gift, no matter how simple or sophisticated, counts – as long as it does reveal something of God’s presence among us. That is the example set by Jesus, when he shared his whole life, till the very last bit, with all who came to him.

It is all about simple deeds of mercy – and in turn that is because of the *little ones*. Who are they, these little ones? In our congregation the children are, of course. But, as Linda taught us yesterday, in the congregation Luke wrote his Gospel for in the first place the little ones were the new members who still had to learn a lot. Well, then the little ones are actually all of us, because we all in continuous need of learning. The little ones are those who know they have no power and need others to get on, and are humble enough to accept that. That is not to make you feel useless or a failure, but simply to put you in your place: in fact you have very little power. But...! No matter how little you are, you always have to chance to do something good. Therefore, all we do in church – worship, teaching, having guild meetings and coffee evenings, caring for the poor, working with children etcetera – need to be focussed on the little ones.

So, let us go out from this religious place and use all our own little gifts for the good of all – and through that to the glory of God.

Amen.

Hymn : ‘As a fire is ment for burning’ (CH 252)

Offering brought forward

Prayer of Intercession

Today we pray for the church.

It’s hopelessly out of sync with the changing times;

it’s attracting far more grey heads than young people;

no-one is listening to what it says in public,

and too often it doesn’t even speak at all;

it keeps repeating words and rituals of centuries gone by;

it fails to reach the hearts of today’s people;

it is crumbling in every sense.

We could easily extend this list of complaints

and it would all be true.

Yet we pray for this church.

We pray that it may find back its roots

and anew dares to share its gifts, such as:
a deep sense of the mystery of grace,
an honest practice of love and a ministry of hope,
a Word from God materialising in our own words and deeds,
a source of spiritual strength and inspiration.

We pray for the members of our own congregation
and all people living in our parish,
that they may be as good as they can,
and find goodness on their path;
that they may help others where possible,
and find helpers if they need them;
that they may know the value of life,
and will be valued when their lives reach their end.
Simple deeds of mercy and learning from you Word
uphold our world, O God.

In silence we remember those
we know need us
to remember them.
(silence)

So we pray,
through Jesus Christ,
our humble Lord.
Amen.

(In Kilcalmonell:)

Ordination

Introduction

Promise

Prayer

Declaration and Welcome

Renewing of Commitment

Prayer

Closing Hymn : 'Go in grace and make disciples' (CH 682)

Blessing