

# New Kilpatrick

## Sermon

6th January 2019

John 8:12-20

***Spirit... that you have set us apart from the world... not to be isolated in it... but to see it in a hopeful... generous... loving way... in a way the world does not see itself... may we find ourselves... set apart... in the middle of things... with a generous word... a living hope... and a love that bends the world back to you... So be it***

Call me miserable... and many do... but we had our Christmas decorations down in the house... on the 2nd of January... Our living room now feels a bit less cosy... in the plain light of the new year... there is a thinness about the place...if not from us after Christmas meals... it doesn't feel as warm... there is less cheer... It's great being a presbyterian again...

And the decor here... will be gone by next week... The richness of the season will have been folded away... numbers attending will also be down again... after very full services over Christmas... especially Christmas Eve... and our ceilidh on hogmanay... that was stowed out...

It felt good during Christmas... we welcomed hundreds of people... and it would be nice to think... we've left some impression... as a faith community... some legacy of welcome and love... that because of what we shared and celebrated less than a fortnight ago... people now love each other more... and feared each other less...

Who knows... but the harsher truth is... this thinner new year reality... is more like who we are... and a Happy New Year to you all!... Now I've really landed you back on earth with a dour thud... after the hope and colour and enjoyment of Christmas... let me lift you back up again...

A previous pope once called the church... a creative minority... which is quite a daring thing to say... of an institution that has been at the forefront of power... that has authenticated kings and parliaments... that still finds a place in governments... whose holy scriptures continue to be used in the courts of the land as a symbol of truth... and generally to swear in members of parliament...

A creative minority... despite the almost 2000 years of power... ever since Emperor Constantine chose Christianity as the formal religion of state... It was the imperial faith... it

had power it never imagined... It controlled lives... wars... rulers... law... justified conflicts... taxes... destinies... inquisitions...

Now... it's called a creative minority...

Did Jesus ever imagine it was going to be anything else?... There is nothing that suggests Jesus ever wanted a church... or power... He says nothing that suggests he was setting up anything other than a creative minority in the world...

And he affirmed that one night... when he was at a festival in Jerusalem... one of the four big ones... It was the week long festival of tabernacles... a fabulously dramatic event... of parades and fire...

The people built for themselves booths... shelters... tents... thousands of them... as still happens today... They were scattered across Jerusalem... four posts with walls constructed from palm leaves... and a scattering of leaves for the roof... The faithful would lie in them each night... this purposefully temporary shelter... and through the palm fronds... stare at the stars...

It was a reminder of their time in the wilderness... those forty years... when they had no power... these were their most vulnerable years... They had left the certainty of Egypt... and were in the desert... did not know where food or water would come from... and the shelters reminded them of that... That sense of vulnerability was important... a corrective to them... about what and who they were called to be...

And as you cast your eyes across the city... there would be an orange glow reflected in faces... tents... buildings... growing stronger as you turned towards the temple... the great temple... of Solomon... it's white limestone brick... dazzling with the brightest orange... that spilled across the city... from four huge flames... that reached into the sky...

When you arrived at the Court of the Women... you'd see four massive golden bowls... resting on tall pillars... ladders would be resting against them... and at the top of each would be a young priest... pouring gallons of oil into the bowls...

Then... wicks made from the garments of priests... would be soaked and set alight and would burn for the week... and it was said that there was no where in Jerusalem... that the light from these four great flames... could not reach...

It was the reenactment of the same story of booths... because how was it that God guided the people out of Egypt and across the wilderness?...

By a great pillar of fire... And so it was... at the feast... of light... The people were reminded of who they were... reminded of the kind of God they followed... reminded of the justice that brought them from bondage to freedom... the grace that turned rocks into bread... the love that spread mana across the land every morning...

This was the God of the people... who heard their cry... who bought justice... who guided them through the wilderness to the promised land... in their vulnerability... a place where they had no map or experience...

And the pillar of light of that story... danced round the city... in the faces of neighbours... across the temple walls... reminding them of the light that guided the ancients across the unknown... that held them... and loved them... and fought with them... and lived in relationship with them... the light that guided them to freedom and new life... from those powers that entrapped and bound up life...

The great burning lights served as a corrective... against seeking power... and towards relying on the light... the promise and the presence of redemption... and in the dramatic context of tabernacles and torches... of the orange light that seeped into every part of the city...and every life... Jesus said... I am the light of the world...

Do you see what the gospel writer does?... John uses the festival as an illustration of who Jesus is... where the light spoke of freedom... and justice... of presence and hope in the vulnerability of the wilderness... the light that guided and held them through that... reminded them of their powerlessness... their reliance on God... and not Pharaoh... if you are looking for the light... he is standing among you...

Religion does not need... and should never seek power... We are not a faith of power... Everything works against that in our holy scriptures... The prophets spoke truth to power... and when the people of faith became too powerful... such as in the early kingship days... God no longer underwrote that power...

Other cultures legitimated what they did by calling on the name of their gods... We still do now... but it is not biblical... The God of Abraham... was the God of the powerless... the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the weak, the poor, the enslaved... Power isn't holy...

Only when we remind ourselves of our vulnerability... of those wilderness years... of fragile booths... can religion begin to transform the human condition... through acts of generosity... and compassion... and love...

Only when we begin to understand ourselves... not as powerful... or dominant... but as creative minorities... do we cease to exist for ourselves... and become friends with the powerless...

In was at that very feast... Jesus gathered to himself... a truth... he was not ever going to be the legitimiser of the powerful... but the light that gathered and led and loved the vulnerable... through the wildernesses of life...

That is who we are... and if anything sticks after Christmas... it is that same truth... of a child... in a stable... surrounded by strangers... foreigners and outcasts... This is the light of the world... called to be a creative minority in the world... and the vulnerability that that brings... for that light is the only real hope for the vulnerable the powerful have forgotten...