

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Acts 17:16-34

29th April 2018

Spirit... come our way... spark our imaginations... trigger the questions... challenge the presumptions... and dare us to live beyond the lines and borders we have kept in place for so long... Come and inspire us... So be it... Amen

We had quite a long session meeting on Tuesday evening... It is the only meeting in the life of the church I genuinely worry about... The very thought of it changes the shape of your day... not because you don't know what might happen... or because you know you can't think quick enough on your feet... or you know you'll be lying in your bed afterwards thinking... I should have said that... or I shouldn't have said that...

Rather... it is the feeling of the very real responsibility of that group of people... who take very seriously... but with humour and grace... the work of the church... there is a lot of listening... to what is really being said... what the silences mean... and where the anxieties lie... It is positive and nerve-wracking at the same time...

On Tuesday... we engaged with the result of some joined up thinking... between future and present... and the way we are going to be engaging with our parish... and make our life more accessible... and how we shape our resources... and buildings... in a way that enables us to do these things best...

We didn't make any decisions... but we did feel the size of the responsibility... and you have heard some of that from Alex today... And we're going to offer a number of opportunities for us all to take part in further discussion and re-imagining our life... asking if from our buildings to language... from how we share bread and wine... to the way we respond to our neighbours in our parish... is understood by those who are not familiar with what does on here...

And we know there is a jar in our language... a parting of the ways between how the church speaks and what our neighbours understand... Instead we ought to have common ground... but we see an increasing distance between what is familiar to us in language and ritual and engagement... and our neighbours when we share in the gift of baptism...

We offer a sign of love to everyone... unconditionally... but this isn't common ground any more... and for those who aren't familiar with the space... the ritual... the language... then it is an awkward moment as our guests catch up with the format or standing and sitting... or knowing the Lord's Prayer... or the doxology... that is very familiar to us... but alien to them... Sometimes we roll our eyes and think... they all used to know what to do in church... but that is not the case... the ground has shifted and it is no longer common... and I wonder if that is what the session was wrestling with on Tuesday... that sense of the size of the distance at times... and what we need to do to establish common ground again...

It's not easy... even for those within the tradition... I remember going to church in Ireland many years ago... I was with my sister in law... We were in a wee town on the River Shanon... but it had a big church... We organised it so we would arrive with just a couple of minutes to go before the service began... so we could sneak in at the back...

Imagine the horror... when we arrived with two minutes to go and there was no one in the church... We strolled down the aisle... and found ourselves getting further and further forward... You couldn't sit at the back in an empty church...

Believe it or not... we ended up in the very front row... We would never have done that in a place we did know... but just as we were about to sneak out and move further back... the rest of the congregation arrived... all seven of them... Now... the church was the same size as New Kilpatrick... and all seven of them... who could have all fitted comfortably in the same pew as us... chose to disperse themselves as far back as possible...

We left we were on show... It was difficult to both try and look like you knew what you were doing... as well as look out the corner of your eye to try and copy what they others were doing... You see we were in an episcopal church... and we had no idea when to kneel... bow...cross ourselves... or even leave...

We did get out safely... and learned a lesson... that while we were both weekly attenders at church... they spoke a different language... and it was an awkward place...

Which is where Paul comes in... having been invited to the Areopagus... a group of philosophers... who wished to find out more about Paul and his Christianity...

If you notice... Paul never uses Christian language... he never mentions Jesus... he entirely uses language the philosophers are familiar with... he engages them in the style of Greek philosophy... 'I see you are spiritual people'... which is a standard Greek way of endearing people... and he quotes... not from the bible but from Greek culture...

It is perhaps a huge lesson for us... that Paul... begins where people are at... creatively finding the means and words to use... that his debaters are familiar with... using what they know... the image of the unknown god for example... as a way of finding common ground...

That perhaps is what the session realised on Tuesday... the task of once more finding the common ground we want to stand on between ourselves... and our parish... It is for our parish that we exist... so what kind of faith community can we shape... that becomes common ground for our neighbours... what space can we create within these walls... that will be welcoming and engaging to those outside our walls... on common ground... What tasks can we share and be partners in beyond these walls... that tell the story of what happens inside these walls... on common ground... What language shall we use... what symbols shall we create... what resources shall we invest in... that opens up church... where we all can meet... and understand each other... on common ground...

Perhaps our common ground begins here... in sharing bread and wine... a meal... a story... a promise... The truth is... every generation has changed this tradition of sharing... It is never the same twice... or at least it ought not to be... It is not a set piece... it is alive... and real... and is food for everyone... so how we share it... makes a difference to the kingdom... and who feels able to be here... who finds the good news here... who meets the God of grace and love here... None of us would meet these things if it was the same shape as it was 100 years ago...

The things of God... continually change... as we reimagine the ground we stand on... and make it welcoming and engaging for our parish... as we create common ground on which to meet our neighbour... common ground where we can understand each other... common ground where we speak the same language... share the same meal...

This is weight of the responsibility we feel... as we make choices about the resources we have... the activities we share... and the buildings we care for... How might we make all that shapes our gospel-living here... all that shapes our following of the Good news... all that creates space to worship and engage and love God... common ground... where both we and our neighbours... feel safe... welcomed... and inspired... to engage with God... and celebrate love... and make the unknown God... known... in new ways...