**New Kilpatrick**

**Podcast**

**12th September 2021**

**James 3:1-12**

**Gathering**

Six words round which to build a church:

Welcome

Families

Creativity

Relationships

Welfare

Communication

These come from first listening: always our first, essential activity. Listening is an act of love: to hear the other, before we place our own story, prejudices, ambitions, wisdom into the circle.

Hello! I’m Roddy Hamilton the minister of New Kilpatrick Parish and thank you for the invitation to join you again. We’re reimagining the church, using the letter of James. This week we take one of these themes, welcome, heard when we listened to our parish and congregation, and explore what that welcome might look like today.

And so we pause, and gather our thoughts, our stories, our families and friends and bring them with us in worship, finding this a safe space for them all.

**Gathering**

Come spirit

Breadth of life

And Creation’s invitation

Among us may there be space

For all we fear to bring

All we need to bring

And all we cannot let go

With these

May we meet you

In this holy space

**Prayer**

Creator

Let us create the space within us

That calms us

Shapes a peace

Holds a silence

In which we can pause

And breathe again

In rhythm with you

That steady

Constant

Beat

Of grace

And forgiveness

And compassion

And love

May we create among us

That community of grace

That lives in rhythm

With the kingdom

That steady

Constant

Beat

Of hope

Justice

Truth

And love

May all that which is greater than us

And all that which is beyond us

And all that which is more ancient

And all that which is yet to be

Find us

And make space for us

Naming us

As loved

Reborn

Renewed

Forgiven

And with these new names

May we live again

Loved back into life

Through forgiveness

And grace

And into the world

And meet you there

O Creator

Hear us

As we say the global prayer

Our father

Who is in heaven

Hallowed be your name

Your kingdom come

Your will be done

On earth as it is in heaven

Give us today our daily bread

And forgive us our debts

As we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation

But deliver us from evil

For yours is the kingdom

The power and the glory

For ever

Amen

**Scripture Introduction**

We are community. We are pilgrims travelling. We find highs in life and lows. We’re human. And we are God’s People.

None of these of course are mutually exclusive, rather they are essential to our humanity. And how we speak of life, especially at the moment, and the words we use and the language to describe how we feel, is also essential to how we find our way, as pilgrims, through this wilderness, not of pandemics, but the consequences of that pandemic. For we will not be left as we were before all this.

Going through these times are cleansing. Wilderness years are times to refocus and renew and it has been true of God’s people for millennia, from the Exodus years learning to be God’s People, to exile where the stories had to be reinterpreted, to Jesus in his own wilderness, finding focus and purpose and strength.

And so we are doing the very same. How shall we learn to speak of ourselves because how we describe ourselves, becomes our future.

The writer James was in the very same place, learning to be community as the early church shifted context and found itself in a different world, now mainly Gentile rather than Jewish. He has a few things to say so let us hear them and explore them.

**Scripture Reading: James 3:1-12**

Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness. **2**For all of us make many mistakes. Anyone who makes no mistakes in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle. **3**If we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us, we guide their whole bodies. **4**Or look at ships: though they are so large that it takes strong winds to drive them, yet they are guided by a very small rudder wherever the will of the pilot directs. **5**So also the tongue is a small member, yet it boasts of great exploits.

How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! **6**And the tongue is a fire. The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell. **7**For every species of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by the human species, **8**but no one can tame the tongue—a restless evil, full of deadly poison. **9**With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God. **10**From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be so. **11**Does a spring pour forth from the same opening both fresh and brackish water? **12**Can a fig tree, my brothers and sisters, yield olives, or a grapevine figs? No more can salt water yield fresh.

**Reflection**

Talking to a colleague this week, we were being fairly miserable together. Anxious about the church, in fear of presbytery plans, worried for our congregations, and we found it near impossible to find the words we needed. The church doesn’t have words to describe the present.

Our language is all couched in old definitions and vocabulary that speaks of how we thought at least two or three generations ago. We don’t actually have language to speak of the present, which is where the Jews in exile found themselves in Babylon: the old definitions were broken and there was no language for their present situation, so they had to reimagine it.

Yet how we speak of ourselves now, defines who we will be in the future. The story we tell now, is the story that shapes us tomorrow. The vocabulary and imagery we use now, becomes how we will be defined in the generation to come. So, that repeated question we constantly ask, what does it mean to be church now? How shall we describe ourselves?

Having just read James there, and is words about watching what we say, we can take that two ways: watch what we say so that we do not hurt each other because you can’t take it back. But also, watch what we say about ourselves as a community, how we describe ourselves. Perhaps more now with the world attempting to finding itself again, including the great institutions of our culture such as the church, ours is to choose what narrative we wish to tell. What story shall we speak of as we grow a different world? What vocabulary shall we use? Watch what we say about ourselves because it will define us. Maybe we can find that the opportunity to retell the story of who we are, is a powerful motivator, but we don’t have language to speak of the present. So let us offer ourselves some, words we have heard from others:

Welcome, families, creativity, relationships, welfare, communication

I’m not going to suggest these six words are a complete answer to that. We’re people of faith; there are no answers, only adventures and risk taking. But my sense is (perhaps incorrectly) these are better understood than baptism, congregation, incarnation, body of Christ, mission, sermon. I know they aren’t completely comparable, baptism is more than welcome, congregation is more than families, incarnation is more than creativity, body of Christ more than relationship, mission more than welfare, sermon more than communication, but they are starting points. They are language of the present, that is understood in the present. So let us start there, and start with welcome.

**Pause**

All are welcome: How might we broaden our welcome and create a faith that is based on a spirit and culture of openness? This is not just about being friendly. It is much deeper than that. It is putting ourselves out in order to welcome others in.

The biblical idea of blessing is interesting: it isn’t just a holy way to say thanks, or an expression to use after a sneeze, ‘Bless you”. What it means is: I will give of myself, so that you might have more. I will give you part of me, that you might have a richer life. It is THAT idea of welcome.

How might we then, as a faith community, who believes in a gospel of welcome, design our activities, reshape our physical structures, and find language in our worship that witnesses to the belief our story as a congregation is a story of welcome, open to the stranger, where it is our DNA to make space with support, a home, a listening soul, a place to hear another’s story, where we aren’t out to turn anyone into a member, coffee convenor, elder or minister, but offer a safe place to be whoever you are.

Now, we currently do this is through opening all our activities, worship, and communion table to all, through visits, topical debates, festivals and Sunday School.

But here are some questions: How might we affirm LGBT, single parents, vulnerable, how might we understand what it feels like to come to church, in our own setting here, from a stranger’s point of view, rather than from what we intend a person to feel who is a stranger? And whose voices are silent in our faith community, whose voices that aren’t there, and why?

Asking questions like these are intended to move us beyond the institution, towards being a community shaped by welcome, by blessing, by love. Welcome always demands love for love gives of self. Love always demands vulnerability. Anything could happen, we are no longer in charge. Vulnerability always demands risk, and people who trust resurrection have a high threshold for risk, and risk is always costly.

The last conversation I ever want to have is about how we get more people to come to church. Rightly or wrongly that is the wrong motive for a faith community. People will come not because of a programme we run or a seminar we all attend about welcoming. People will come because they are interested in who we are, seeking meaning and hope, they see belief in action. It is pure James, the letter we are reading. Ours is to communicate that in a way that is present. And maybe that is where we pick up next week: communication.

For now, no answers. I’m afraid faith doesn’t offer answers, just the pilgrimage, so instead, an invitation to ponder on welcome, to regroup round this gospel imperative that we might shape the future, round how we describe ourselves in the present.

**News**

**Prayers for Others**

Loving God

Who sees the world beyond pandemics

And conflict

And hunger

And injustice

And wealth and poverty

Yet is alive in the midst of all these

Among the hurting

The hungry

The conflicted

The terrorised

The poor

We don’t have the words, O God

Genuinely we don’t

We just want to pause here

And let our silence cry out

And our fear be heard

And our anger known

And our confusion understood

About this world

Afghanistan and Yemen

Haiti and Bangladesh

Rainforests plundered

And deserts growing

Poverty of morals

And the wealth gap between us all

That just keeps growing

In our communities

And our parish

Hold our silences, O God,

For they are our prayers

Hear our fears, O Love,

For these are what our words cannot express

Know our anger, O Spirit,

Which is beyond words

Understand our confusion, O Jesus,

Which we cannot clear in our heads

In these spaces hear us

Naming our families and friends

The ill and the anxious

The grieving and the lonely

The worried and the overwhelmed

It is our honest prayer

And we have no words to fill it

(Pause)

So be it

Amen

**Benediction**