

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

26th May 2019

Ezra 3:8-13

Spirit... in the places of our tradition... may we continue to find the new life... in the ancient words we hear... hear the word for our day... and among these oldest walls... the peace of generations gathered... that we might be inspired and renewed... So be it...

It has been a strange week this week... a confusion of hope and intent and fear... I'm not sure it was meant to be all these things... but as this week went on... it just got stranger... more dissatisfying... less clear... I'm talking of the General Assembly of the church... and along with Fiona Nicolson... one of our elders... we were commissioners...

The General Assembly is our national annual gathering for a week in Edinburgh... ministers and elders... those who are leaders in the church... and perhaps you can imagine how strange it felt... not so much staying in Edinburgh for a week... but the confused mix of assembly the opening... with all its pomp and show... where the church gives the impression it is more important than it actually is... with all the moderators that are still with us... dressed in their 17 century court dress... along with the queens royal archers... dressed in their finery... with the lord high commissioner... being trumpeted in by buglers of the royal household... accompanied by the First Minister... all gathering for the opening of the Church of Scotland's General Assembly... that feels more like a parliament... rather than a church whose first priorities are its neighbour and its God... it was indeed strange...

And into that strangeness... came the Special Commission... brought together last year to report on structural reform of the church... and every idea was accepted... from changing the governing body... to finance... to presbyteries... to session... followed by the presentation and complete acceptance of a 'radical action plan'... the next day...

I was talking to the editor of Life and Work... who said on Wednesday morning... this is going to be an assembly that will be one of the historical ones... as the church finally... finally... makes choices about rebuilding itself with a new structure and radical plan... that will change who it is...

And into this strangeness that is the church... came a question about whether or not the church needed to be presbyterian in government at all... where decisions were made by elders and ministers rather than everyone... This was accepted... and so a special commission has been set up... to explore whether our church government needs to be presbyterian... which might turn out to be the most radical thing to come from the general assembly...

Then Nicola Sturgeon spoke to the assembly on Wednesday... commenting how important the church still was to society... but strangely it didn't feel that way later that day... as someone asked the church to divest from oil and gas companies... supported by youth delegates in the echo of the climate crisis...

But that was voted down... and despite the First Minister's comments about how church can still shape society... it refused to take that step... as if adopting a new structure and a radical plan... was enough for one week... ideas... it has to be said... have been around since I was a student... but never acted upon... The strangeness got stranger as the church eased itself back... into its old ways...

Then a new group of 12 trustees appointed for the governance of the church... but there were comments that those 12 felt too established... to give energy to new ideas... and by the end of the week... that sense of renewal was less tangible... made worse by a rejection to even consider a gender balance in this powerful governing body of the church... with no space for young folk... cancelling the National Youth Assembly... and for young folk to have a voice now... the principle clerk sharply informed the assembly... you have to make them elders...

That strange yet familiar disappointment... the way the church works... doesn't easily allow... or even want... anything to really change...

Yet in all that strangeness... a reorganising of churches income so more can be spent locally... though that had to be really fought for... a new fund to apply to for special projects... cutting presbyteries down to just 12... drastically reducing the size of kirk sessions... lots of structural things...

But perhaps out of all the strangeness this week... the church is perhaps more now than ever before... a local... expression of a God who is met in the relationships we build... revealed in the words we use locally in our neighbourhood... where we find the young... the ill... the imprisoned... the hungry... It was just so disappointing and frustrating after 10 days of a festival here... going to the General Assembly...

More than ever in this generation... the church is not what happens in Edinburgh... but what happens here... It always has been of course... what church is is simply the expression of the love of God to the people who are our neighbours... This is where the creativity lives... where the life is found... where the justice is delivered... the welcome given to every generation...

It has always meant to have been that way... we know that... but it matters more now... What has been good about the assembly... is that the national offices have been asked to resource more of that... to let us be more culturally... missionally relevant... locally...

But there is a lesson to learn... from Ezra... returning from his exile... an exile the church perhaps feels today... and we've talked about that a number of times...

Coming back to his local place... from a foreign land... Ezra draws the people together round the original stories... They establish a temple... the second one on that site... and people weep... in joy and sadness... remembering what was before... and now no longer... yet what is still to be...

It is that crossover moment for Ezra... and those newly returned from exile... Edinburgh isn't exactly exile... but it is perhaps where the church is...

The church is between moments... and indeed it is a strange place to be... And it will be there for some time... in joy and sadness... between what has been... and what is still to be... It doesn't know what it is at the moment... all the balls are in the air... and haven't landed yet... At some time... we'll see a purpose again... as radical action plans develop... and structural reform evolves...

But for us... we know of a gospel... we've already affirmed last week... the church is local... This is where all the creativity and life of the gospel is... this is where risks are

taken and relationships built and lines crossed... We've already done that... and done that many times...

This is where we meet the stranger and the imprisoned and the hungry and the homeless and the naked and the ill and the lonely... where we can bend and break the rules we need to in order to do that... and model what institutions find more difficult to do... we're already doing that... often...

This is where we live on the hoof... dangerously... never being risk-averse in a messy world... but responding creatively... re-imagining the church in our parish... choosing to go with the life... which we have discovered so recently once more in the last couple of weeks... where perhaps foundations were laid... for a new temple... a new chapter in what it means to be church... looking back and weeping for what has been perhaps... but living faithfully in joy for what is still to be...

This week it felt so different being the local church from the national version... so different here... where ideas are tried... and risks taken... and people met... and partnerships developed... and creativity allowed... and faith stories trusted and stretched and explored... and the kingdom unfolded in our neighbourhood... and Jesus' call followed...

Church is what WE do and how WE live in our neighbourhood... in the name of the love that is God... It is not a strange institution... an assembly... a committee... a presbytery...

Strangely... it is us...