

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

15th September 2019

Judges 11:29-36

Spirit... in all the questions we have... take us beyond where we've been before... in all the honesty in our faith... be our companion on the way... in all the faith we cling to... invite us to let go and be held in a greater love... So be it... Amen

Have you noticed your TV habits changing?... Apparently they have... The rules of how we watch television have been torn up... No longer do we gather round the TV on a Sunday night as a family and watch the big serial... Onedin Line... Poldark the original...

And yes... I really am that old that I remember doing that...

Now instead... we don't use Monday mornings to talk to our colleagues about the latest episode... I discovered my daughter binge watched three series... not episodes... but series of a programme over one weekend to catch up with new found university friends in order to have something to talk about...

It is what we do... and I find myself doing that too... Amazon Prime... Netflix... and now Apple have their own channel in which you can just watch episode after episode of a series... I've been doing that with a series called Lucifer... I'm embarrassed talking about it... but it serves the illustration... Lucifer is the devil... incarnated in the shape of Tom Ellis... helping a detective solve murders...

Okay... so it's not quite the quality of the Onedin Line... but anyway... the devil never lies... He always keeps his promise... this idea of doing a deal with the devil... and it is his badge of honour that he never breaks a vow...

Tom Ellis might get away with it but Jephthah doesn't... Even when Jephthah's daughter asks him if there is no way out of it... he says... My word is my bond... and I am a man of my word... as if he's chosen the higher ground... Would you agree?...

Jephthah is a literary character... who has cousins in Greek mythology... Idomenius... asked the gods to calm a storm... promising in return to sacrifice the first living thing he

saw upon his return... which turned out to be his son... and the story of Agamemnon's daughter is much the same... well rehearsed myths to help us with moral dilemmas...

The rabbinical commentary on Jephthah's dilemma is interesting saying... Jephthah is an ignorant man... because while rule number 207 says do not break a vow... he ought to know that a vow to kill a child... is never valid... In fact it was what set the Jews apart from their surrounding neighbours... and the whole point of Abraham and Isaac...

Jephthah... if he was at all faithful to God... would have known... he had merely to pay a certain sum to the sacred treasury of the Temple... and he would have been freed from the vow... Indeed he was free even without such a payment...

So when his daughter asks... "Is it written in the Torah human should be brought as burnt offerings?"... He replied his vow was his bond... Jephthah's daughter argues with him... citing other texts where children were not sacrificed... But Jephthah... despite his own daughter's pleading... remains inflexible...

And there perhaps is the point of this moral tale... Jephthah's inflexibility...

Some use this tale as a lesson not to make rash vows... a contemporary lesson perhaps for these strange political times perhaps...

But what is repugnant is that keeping religious rules and vows... might matter more than the life of Jephthah's daughter...

This story illustrates the foolish pride... of remaining 'inflexible'... This is a story... for all those who decide... religious vows and codes and rules must be absolute... The lesson is... that way of thinking... always ends in death...

Being a liberal congregation... being a community of faith... who has generally erred on being generous with our understanding of the gospel... we can recognise that truth... When the rules become so inflexible... or our foundational narrative so rigid in how we understand it... or the traditions we have become so fixed... or what we allow ourselves to do or become becomes obdurate... it always ends in the collapse of the institution...

To have life... we need to be flexible... to grow... or reduce... to evolve... or fade... and that was the lesson Jephthah didn't learn...

Which interestingly finds us in this place... where the narrative... the story of who we are as church... will either grow... or become rigid... will either find new life in being flexible in understanding what is it to be church today... or hold on to what we've got and become inflexible...

One of the interesting things we have found over the last year... as we have increased our community work... through our community team... is that the ground has shifted... the possibilities of how we are a faith community in this parish has moved...

From consultations to festival... we have experienced new places we can be church... in partnership with other groups... in being a player along side others in responding to our community... sharing creative and imaginative ways with artists and singers and dancers in bringing families together... supporting dementia... sharing our mental health...

And our faith team... has been seeking ways to understand what that means... finding ways to describe what is happening... that helps us understand what it means to be church in this century... It is new ground... it is unfamiliar... it requires new language and images... and is scary as much as it is exciting...

And what we have been doing instinctively in this congregation... is what the national church has now asked us all to participate in after this year's assembly... with a new radical action plan...

Much of which is structural... reducing presbyteries... sessions... finance... training... and to be fair... some changes are offered in order to enable us to think more creatively...

The problem with a structural plan... is that we don't know what structures we need... until we are on uncommon ground with others in our parish... Only when we are standing in that new place... conversing and sharing with those we haven't before... in new relationships... only then can we begin to get an idea of what structures we need to make that possible...

Too often we do things backward... We change stuff before we have an idea why we are changing it... we presume to know what is needed before we have the conversation with the folk we are aiming to broaden the church to include...

How we understand church... is shifting... and as a faith community... we are finding ourselves increasingly on ground that is uncommon for ourselves... and we can rigidly hold on to what we're familiar with church... or we find that flexibility... in how we understand our relationships... our sense of who we are and what we have to learn about ourselves and our neighbours... about how the world works now... how it watches TV is just one case in point...

When we explore that unfamiliar ground for a while... which is what we do when we turn towards our community... then we will come to some understanding of what kind of structures... space... resources we need... to be this more flexible... contemporary... community of faith...

We don't do church Jephthah style... we are called to do it more like Jesus did... where those inflexible rules... didn't exist... He was the one who sat with tax collectors and sinners and shouldn't have... gathered grain on the sabbath to eat... and shouldn't have... spoke to women... engaged with foreigners... drank with samaritans... ate with Syrophenician women... and shouldn't have... listened and evolved his own beliefs because of their story... while those who were incensed were the most religious... imagining the rules... the doctrine... the practice were rigid... They are not...

How we do church... is how Jesus did church... love folk... in a messy kind of way... the rules have always been flexible... So as the paradigm shifts in every generation... let us explore still more of the uncommon ground with our neighbours... be in relationship with the unfamiliar... to understand what is happening... and then... with the inbuilt flexibility of our faith... evolve the structure... the stones... the resources of the church... that it might continue to hold, love and give life to this re-imagined way of being God's People...