

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

17th November 2019

Hebrews 11:1-12

Spirit... let your imagination run riot in us... may it inspire us in ways we can't yet imagine... may it plant seeds for fruit we have yet to taste... may it iterate rules that have kept us limited for too long... Spirit... may you be our inspiration and adventurer... So be it...

If you have ever wondered where the church is at today... all you needed to do was attend last week's presbytery meeting... presbytery being our monthly meeting with congregations in a local area... Our area stretching from Milngavie to Helensburgh... and we meet to.....

Well that's the point... The meeting was to explore the reorganising of the 42 presbyteries into just 12... but where it came to a head... before we got near that topic... was a business committee deliverance which read... Presbytery notes that a team from the Business Committee has completed the task of 'spring-cleaning' the contents of the Presbytery's Filing Cabinets...

And I thought... is this the level of our debate and interest in the church... noting the presbytery cupboards have been tidied...

I am just hoping this is not the mark against which presbytery will examine my cupboards... book shelves or desk... And if you ever come into the church office... you would rightly ask... "What desk?"... because it is difficult to find under the mayhem...

It was a moment where you realised how institutionalised the church has become... that it was important enough to formally note the cupboards had been tidied...

Where is the great litany of faithful followers who took on the empires of the world... who risked everything for the faith... who experienced faith as an adventure... and who have carried on faithfully through difficult, dark and dangerous times... into the unknown journey that ought to be how we know faith?...

It is of course still there... but at times it feels it is not the church that has chosen to follow it... Rather it has chosen to define Christianity as a system of belief... settled dogmas... limiting rules... focussing on structure and cupboard cleaning... and has rather lost sight of the idea faith is about transforming the relationships of life and community and future...

Hebrews 11... is a well known and generous passage... That great litany of the faithful... of the Abrahams and Moses and Enochs and Noahs... who decided *not* to settle down... *not* become familiar with any one place or experience... but follow the adventure... knowing it was a choice they took for transformation... It was about recognising the unknown they travelled into... would reshape and transform them... without any idea of where they would end up...

That is the tradition we own as God's People... but Christianity... while it may have begun like that... has settled into a presentation of beliefs... and dogma... an organised religion... that protects and preserves itself by promoting a system of belief... where Jesus has become an object of worship... rather than a model for living... a belief rather than a way of faith...

When we continue to grow our belief rather than our faith... continue to define ourselves about what we think about Jesus rather than how we live in the world... we are on dangerous ground... because that system of belief... has supported a wide range of unintended consequences... from colonialism to environmental destruction... subordination of women to stigmatisation of LGBT... anti-semitism to Islamophobia... as we have seen this week from a ministerial colleague just down the road in Scotstoun... and his newsworthy meeting with Mr Corbyn... and the reading of his twitter feed...

Faith rather is about transformation... about the way we live with each other... the grace and forgiveness and love with which we respond to one another... That is never reduced to a set of beliefs or thoughts... Faith is a way of travelling in the world...

Which is what Hebrews illustrates... belief is hardly mentioned... This litany illustrates the faith they had... the transformative way they lived... It is illustration after illustration of living in uncertainty... and recognising what they found to live and journey through that uncertainty... was grace... and forgiveness... and mercy... and love... Gifts that

transformed their relationships with those they encountered... living faithfully was essential... not what they believed...

So here's my question... What would it be like for the Church... to rediscover faith has little to do with belief, structures, dogma or creeds... but is simply a just and generous way of life... rooted in reflection... and expressed in compassion... that makes amends for its mistakes... and is dedicated to creating community for all... That these alone are essential to live fully today... in all our uncertainty... for they alone enable us to transform the relationships we have within our community and parish and church...

Which is the manifesto I am still looking for in this coming election... Faith is not something certain... unlike beliefs that actually crush us when we try to hold on to them despite their logic no longer making sense... Faith is a way of living that is transformative... because it lives with unknowing... it has a measure of mystery... it nurtures our doubts...

When you know the gift of doubt... you have begun to have faith... for doubt is the beginning of growing... Whenever we grow... we need to let go something we have known... because it does not fit any longer... and we go through a stage of unknowing and confusion... before finding balance again... once we have rearranged or let go... or reimagined that thing...

It is what we all naturally do as we move from being children... through teenage years... and into adulthood... and that process never stops... It is an adventure... it is a faithful journey because we need to enter the unknowing... present yourself in new unfamiliar places... in order to grow... It is there you find what is essential in that process... those things called grace... forgiveness... love... mercy... These are the things that take us through times of uncertainty...

Growing up... maturity... is not a system of belief... it is a way of living... Faith too is about growing... Faith is not a system of belief... Faith also is a way of living...

And we have a saviour... who says just that... that God was to be found in self-giving service to the stranger and the enemy... rather than in self-asserting doctrine of how we

define God... He said two things... love God... love neighbour... and both are relationships... ways of living... not beliefs... not structure... not dogma...

And so... in the echo of Abraham and Moses... and all the faithful adventurers the book of Hebrews offers... we face a critical question for our time... must we stay where we are... forever defining ourselves as a system of beliefs... rules... traditions... that keep a tired old institution going... or might we really clean out the cupboards... and migrate to the biblical understanding of Christian faith... as a way of life... a way of living that transforms relationships... community... church...

Living in the uncertainty... allowing ourselves not to settle down... or limit ourselves to definitions... to hold onto only that which is absolutely necessary for transforming our relationships... grace and love and mercy and forgiveness... is where we discover the gospel... for these alone enable us to live faithfully... creatively... lovingly...

There is no belief... no words... no taboos... systems... structures or labels... that are essential to faith... And when we realise these things no longer define us... or limit us... we are free to love more fully and radically and generously... in such faithful living... we will once more... find the church...