

Aberconway Street in Clydebanks... is a row of brick built terraced houses... that overlook Whitecrook Park... the tennis courts... the boating pond... which is now a garden... and the swing park...

It is a respected street... where the foremen of John Browns Ship Yard were given houses... If you lived in Aberconway Street... you had showed you were responsible... kept in line... not broken the rules... and were now allowed to wear a bowler hat... the symbol of a foreman... Perhaps... there are a number here who will remember that...

But one of the things that helped you become a foreman in a bowler hat... and thus have a house in Aberconway Street... was in being ordained an elder... as this was a sign of responsibility... of knowing where authority lay... of keeping to the rules and regulations... the company and indeed the church... could rely on you...

Being an elder looked good on a CV... Perhaps it still does... but you'll be thankful that this morning you were given bibles rather than bowler hats... and given we are now in our 50th year of ordaining women... that's maybe just as well...

But then... as now... the text we've read this morning... probably wasn't well known... if at all... but it is right to read it on a day we ordain elders... for it reminds us... despite our traditions... and the rules of which elders were the gate keepers... being a leader in the church... is not always to keep to what is kosher...

Peter was a righteous man... he lived by the law... and no matter how hungry he was... he refused to eat that which his tradition had claimed was unclean... Three times he did so...

Right in the midst of this vision was the ongoing debate about the Gentiles and the Jews... and what rules of membership there had to be... The debate was heavily weighted towards the Jewish tradition... but here is God... inviting a new vision for the church... where there was no weighting... and where the rules and traditions that divided the Gentiles from the Jews... were redrawn towards accepting the Gentiles...

It didn't go down that well as you can imagine... The bowler hatted leaders of the early church... took a lot of persuasion to shift their tradition... to change the rules... to accept that what was once kosher... no longer was... It was a paradigm shift... it truly was... for this meant there was neither male or female... Jew or Gentile... slave or free... in God's eyes... the church had just become universal...

Now... as leaders of the local congregation here... I invite you... and us all... to hear this story again in an age where once more paradigms are shifting... and the church is called to discern what it is becoming... eldership... is not the prize of a bowler hat having kept to the party line... but is... the affirmation of a God and a congregation... who have said yes to your call... to help us travel to where the spirit is calling us to be... in our continual renewal and re-form-ation... always alive to the possibility of God doing a new thing...

Guided... not by the rules and traditions... but primarily... by the love we have for each other... Jew or Gentile...

Love doesn't always lead us to do what is kosher... but to do what is loving... that is life-giving... faith-building... and love-enriching... beyond where we have been before...

So bless you... on this journey we make together... as a whole congregation... and with your help... willing to explore... and called to be... what God's imagination and spirit... has in store for us yet...