

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

24th February 2019

John 7:1-13, 25-31

Come Spirit and be the colour of our hope... the texture of our belief... the possibility in our faith... Come and inspire us with life and eternity... and ground it where we are right now... Amen

Like any job... there are always highs and lows in any given week... and I had both on Wednesday and Thursday this week... Both involved schools... Both involved assemblies...

Primary school assemblies are always a joy... There's an enthusiasm from the children... who give you a round of applause before you even start... You've already won before you begin... and you whip them all up into a state of excitement... and then leave... letting the teachers bring them back down to earth... That was Wednesday afternoon...

Thursday morning... I had assembly again... but this time it was at secondary school... Totally different story... Those enthusiastic primary children have grown up a little... and are a lot more difficult to please... They come into the assembly hall... see you waiting for them... and you can feel the will to live... leave them... You've lost before you've begun...

But these are period long assemblies now... fifty minutes... Five minutes was always too long for me at a secondary school... completely out my depth... uphill battle... so a whole period... filled by the chaplain... with the entire year... is... well I'll let you invent the word...

However... this week we were exploring the idea that dignity... is the result of treating people with respect... so I asked: who do we respect in our communities?... We then reflected on those who were missed out in their answers... the poor... the unattractive according to social media... those from different cultures or religions... the frail and elderly... people with mental ill-health...

And the point was... our respect tends to be focused on those who are most like us... and that gives us a measure of what is normal... and against that we measure folk... But no one... is normal... Life doesn't make us normal... rather... unique... but what is obvious today is we relate more and more to only those who are like-minded with us...

And at assembly we were reflecting on how we use social media for that end... while it can open up a whole variety of worlds... what actually happens is... we gravitate towards those we are most like... and hear less and less about folk and ideas and thoughts that challenge us...

Even the way we read a newspaper online:... apparently we tend to read only those articles we agree with... and as we read one article... the algorithms offer us links to similar articles... and we're never challenged in our thinking or experience of the world in the way a hard copy of a paper does... Even if we just skim most of the headlines and read only the first few sentences of most of the stories... we make contact with other points of view... and ideas... and diversity...

We are in an age that is shifting to the belief... our communities are best built round a group of people who are similar to each other... our measure of normal... while in truth... the richest communities are actually those that are diverse... that respect and offer dignity to those different to us... who don't all think the same...

That's your parish church... A parish church absorbs the whole community... Over time... people break away who are all like minded... forming new congregations... but your parish church... that illustrates the breadth of a gathered community... is the healthiest model... thus 370 years later we are still here...

But obviously the diversity debate is older than that... and it is where the Jews and Jesus find themselves in our passage today... in that diversity of opinion about who Jesus was... Messiah... Lord... Healer... Teacher...

When I was doing some reading for this sermon... someone wrote... and I can't remember who it was... Diversity... is the library of our faith... What a fabulous expression... Diversity is the library of our faith... and Jesus... being a classical Jew... relished different opinions... for Judaism is a religion of debate and discussion... a tradition where every time you read scripture together... and challenge each other... you find something new...

Clearly there was great debate in Jesus time about the Messiah... some imagining Jesus was the one... and others not so sure... even Jesus at times... doesn't seem quite so sure... agreeing in part with Peter's confession further on in the story... yet wanting everyone to keep quiet about it...

People were wrestling with who Jesus was... and we still do... because our ideas constantly change... our experience now... is ever challenging what we experienced in the past... That's a living and honest faith...

I was talking to someone earlier this week... about being how faith enables us to have three contradictory opinions at the same time... It came from a news story a short while ago that really challenged the idea of a loving God... why does a good God let bad things happen... and when you put yourself in the place of the other... and the horror of their experience... it makes you seriously question... Our discussion came to no conclusion... but we agreed to meet again... because it stretches you... challenges what you have taken for granted... and invites you to let God grow...

In our faith... it is far more important to ask the right questions... which invites a rich and diverse faith... than have the right answers... that invites only uniformity...

So Jesus found himself in the middle of a faith debate then... as we continue to do in our faith today... He found himself in a market place... a temple precinct... where Jesus was met by a diversity of ideas... and if you notice... he didn't stop the debate by answering anything... he simply continued it by asking more questions...

It is the way of life for our faith... and the way of giving faith life... So what we once thought the word 'God' meant... does not have to be the way we think of God now... Messiah... Christ... Church... Kingdom... Salvation... Resurrection... all are up for constant renewal... The Bible does not limit our adventure... because page after page offers different insights... different descriptions... different thoughts from a diversity of people... even Paul himself offers three or four different understandings of resurrection... and dare we imagine... the more the church is known for that... the richer our library of faith it will be...

And I wonder if that is why Jesus used the freedom of stories to speak of the kingdom... rather than confessions of faith... and creeds and doctrines which we rather live in fear of...

Stories are free... stories are constantly reinterpreted... stories cannot be controlled... That's the method of choice for Jesus... which is unlike the church... that tends to tie down thought... bundle it into a doctrine... a confession... that we are stuck with... that eventually runs out of life... and people who believe them...

This place of faith... is a place of debate... of diversity... of evolving views... and of listening to them all... That is how we can be most honest in our faith... and most alive to our belief... It is what we did this morning over breakfast... as we discussed the idea of welcome and who we are to others...

And it is something we will be doing more of... as a whole congregation and people beyond our congregation... because as we ever take steps towards who we are becoming... our future is focussed in the questions we explore with each other... the experiences we've had... the diversity of views we are challenged by... of those within and beyond the church...

For the kingdom is not a silo full of like minded... similar thinking people... but a place that is alive because of its diversity... its rich respect of all... the dignity of difference... and its ability to debate and explore and be challenged by the great library of faith we share...