

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Revelation 21:1-14

3rd November 2019

Spirit... may you move us to where we do not wish to go... may you find us in unexpected places... and may you renew us through the experience... So be it... Amen

There are certain things I have avoided doing throughout my life... tidying my desk is one of them... jogging is another... eating tripe... It's a strange and eclectic list... and on that list is reading the book of Revelation... I was brought up in the age when this was a set text among some believers... taking these mysterious words quite literally... so I avoided it... imagining it is instead full of hyperbole... strange visions and dreams from the edge of consciousness...

Sounds rather close to what we might be hearing over the next few weeks during the General Election!... Forgive me for being flippant... but to say we live in strange times is just repeating what people have been saying since the writing of Revelation...

But are we... living in strange times?...

Certainly it hasn't felt so uncertain for a long time... You used to have some idea of what would tend to happen with elections... We had some sense of who we were... we moved together... we didn't keep running at things until we got the result we wanted... There was an understanding... The unwritten constitution didn't need to be written down... because there were core values... essential truths the majority took for granted and believed in... but we question that now... Global leaders are becoming caricatures of our fears and prejudices...

In the time of John's visions in Revelation... there was the same sense of fear... core values and essential truths were being sidelined... The fragile faith of the church felt vulnerable... the powerful thought mostly of themselves... society was shaped round them... factions dominated... and fought between themselves... and the least... simply became collateral damage...

In such a time... what underpinned society and faith... underwent a giant upheaval... How the faithful understood themselves changed... The old covenant was replaced by a new version that made more sense of the times... The old centre of faith... Jerusalem... grew to be less a physical place... and more a metaphor of God's presence with people... They saw Jesus inventing new a covenant... It became Christianity... Christianity evolved into a church...

But over time... as the church became an institution... it ritualised what Jesus taught... turn the other cheek... love your enemy... It encrusted them with doctrine and rules... and embalmed them with an impenetrable shell of dogma... and used fear and shame to influence and control people... far more than the love which Jesus was about...

But you can only go so far with that... and every so often... a great rummage sale begins... as the Episcopal Bishop Mark Dyer called it... when the church and society... move so far from its core values... loses touch with itself... and it feels lost... and so there begins a re-forming... ridding itself of what it had become... and reinventing itself round the treasures it had forgotten... a New Jerusalem...

And sociologists recognise a pattern here... that every 500 years there is a period when we have a breakdown... and we go through a process of reinventing... reimagining... those essential truths again...

And church history illustrates that... 500 years ago - the reformation... 500 years before that - crusades... 500 years before that - the Roman and Celtic debate... 500 years before that... Jesus... 500 years before that... exile to Babylon... and with each... of these giant upheavals... there was a reimagining of the faith... And now 500 years after the reformation... the church in the west is having another crisis... might we once more be in the middle of discovering a new understanding of who we are... reimagining our essential truths and core values?...

This month's Bulletin newsletter... is a much bigger version... an extended story of the congregation today... how we might be reimagining our core values and essential truths... these being... being loved by God... we love neighbour... It is about how we are responding to being loved by God... through our faith formation within the

congregation... and how we are loving neighbour... our partnerships beyond the congregation...

And I know not everyone is comfortable with that... it is a less familiar place for us to be in... but it ought not to be... Being loved by God... leads us to love neighbour... are our core values and how we gathered round these is important...

Thus it has always been... In the past... how we've created community round healing... has led to hospitals... how we've created community round the least... has shaped welfare programmes... how we've created community round improving people's chances... has shaped education systems...

And when you look at each time the church has faced such giant upheavals... each rebirth of Christianity... has led to the faith becoming more inclusive and universal... Each time we change... we expand our thinking and being and inclusivity...

Living through such times however... is a difficult and frightening thing... When you live within a sacred tradition... everything can seem essential and untouchable... I know that... It genuinely keeps me awake at night... quite literally... worrying about us... what to leave be and what to let go... what is essential and how to move us through difficult decisions... and for all of us as a congregation... it will take compassion and grace to be aware of these changes in how we understand ourselves... our tradition... and faith... without responding with resistance or defensiveness...

The only comfort perhaps is that we are already a reformed church... everything we do in our faith today... has already gone through numerous reforms... letting go huge things... but each time we let it happen... we become more inclusive and universal... as we ought...

And let's believe that is perhaps so... because we come back to one essential truth and core value... As a community... at bottom... for over 2000 years... we have been held together by mutual love... and not... as with other institutions... so obvious today... on fear and shame...

But lets explain one other thing... As we shift as a church in these times... and you will see in the Bulletin something of the beginning of that... each time it has happened... the Church... (capital 'C')... is not defined by what it is busy doing... but what it is busy *being*... It is not WHAT we do... but HOW we do it...

When we think about being the church today... our mission is never about the number of people we have in our pews... which is simply about keeping the institution going... Our mission... is about *how* we can change lives and relationships within our whole community and parish... in the world... It is about *how* we share our love with neighbours... about *how* we are reshaping and transforming our relationships with others outside the church...

Being the church is about being in relationship with the world... Indeed the church is a relationship rather than an institution... journeying with the world... moving the world we share with our neighbours... closer to the love of the Kingdom of God... a new Jerusalem... here...

That's the longer, deeper, fuller experience we need first... because that will shape what resources we need... in order to be the love of God fir the parish and community and world...

What is the church but a community held together not by power... not by fear... but by love... What we DO... is not an essential thought in this great rummage sale we are going through... It is all about HOW we do it... WHO we are for our neighbour... it is what we show ourselves to be as the Body of Christ... and how we relate to our neighbours... who we will befriend and who we will ask for help from in our community... our world... that enables its to be transformed...

Once we are engaged with that fully... in relationship with our community and world... then we know what we plan towards... It may feel like strange times... it may feel unfamiliar... but in truth... we've been here before every 500 years... and we are perhaps at one of the most creative and exciting times of being the church... for we are part of the great emergence of the church... and what the community of God... is still yet to be...