

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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## **PRAISE THE LORD**

**5<sup>th</sup> January 2014**

Jeremiah 31:1-13  
Ephesians 1:3-14

Back in the summer – remember the summer? - when the weather was good, how often did you say “Nice day!” and hear the response “We'll pay for it later”? Or maybe you were the one giving that response. I was hearing it again at the beginning of last month when we had that spell of unseasonably mild weather - “We'll pay for it later.” There is something about the Scots character, or some Scots characters, maybe, which seems determined not to relax and enjoy the blessings of life, whether they are good weather, or good friends, or a good meal, or good health, or any of God's other good gifts to us. There is something in that character which is always looking for the catch, or the down-side, or the demand for payment.

This is the second Sunday of Christmas, and tomorrow is the feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany is revelation, when we remember that the glory of God which was found in Jesus was revealed, not just to his own people but to and for the whole world. In some way it is when the Christmas message gains its completion and its greatest “so-what”. Without Jesus being for everyone, the Christmas good news would have very little to do with us, and be only of academic interest.

Of course for long enough, until relatively recently, Scotland didn't really celebrate that Papist feast, Christmas. My grandmother went to school on Christmas day – though admittedly that was over a century ago now. And perhaps it is something of that “pay-for-it-later” attitude that makes us so keen to give to charity at this time of year. Not that we shouldn't give to charity – it is always a very good response to life – but I wonder if for at least some, the Christmas giving, in offering or in private donations, is partly to ease a conscience that would otherwise feel uneasy at festivity and celebration when we know that the world has not had all of its problems solved and there is still so much suffering.

The message of Christmas is that God came to save the world, but we know that until Christ comes again, which is part of the message of Advent, the world will not be properly transformed. In this time in which we live, the Kingdom of God does make progress, and does flourish in unlikely places, but it still has a way to go.

But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't celebrate and give ourselves over to praise. When Jeremiah, that weeping prophet, spoke to his people and told them to praise and give thanks, it was not because their sufferings were over – in fact they were just beginning. But he knew that they wouldn't last forever and he knew that God was still God and that last thing, that God is still God, is always a reason to praise and rejoice and give thanks.

Jeremiah calls for joy and praise now although the good times are still a promise, not a reality. We can always find reason why it would be wrong to be happy, and the church has often been accused of that, of being a place for dour people, for lack of joy. There is grief in our personal life, or in the life of our neighbour; there is war near at hand or far away, and would it not be insensitive to rejoice while others suffer? But praise is a discipline - if put that way maybe it will appeal to our dour Scottish Presbyterianism. Praise is something not just for when everything in the garden couldn't be better, when we have arrived at heaven's gates. It is for every day. Because while there may be reasons why we should be muted in our joy, there are also always reasons why we should not be.

The story is told, and I do hope that it is apocryphal, of a minister from America who was to do an exchange with a minister from Scotland. He was delighted to find a traditional stone built church with a high pulpit which fitted in perfectly with his tartan coloured spectacle view of what a Scottish church looked like. On the first Sunday the church was packed with regulars and visitors wanting to hear him. And they were not disappointed, he had a loud passionate voice, full of enthusiasm. They were enjoying listening to him, but from the minister's point of view things were not quite so enjoyable. He came from a tradition where preaching was regularly interrupted by cries from the congregation of 'Hallelujah' 'Praise the Lord' and the like and so was a bit unsettled at the lack response to his preaching.

After a few minutes of preaching he tried to rectify this by pausing and shouting 'Praise the Lord!' expecting at the very least a few 'Amen's' or 'Halleluiahs' but the folk in the church remained silent. He carried on preaching and then shouted again 'Praise the Lord!' this time banging his fist down on the lectern. Again no response. The sermon continued and then a third time he shouted 'Praise the Lord' banging his fist on a lectern so hard that dust rose and again no response. As he was coming to his last point he decided he would get a reaction come what may and shouted 'PRAISE THE LORD!' while banging both fists hard upon the lectern. Unfortunately the lectern was not used to this treatment and snapped and fell to the ground; as this unbalanced the minister he proceeded to lose his balance and fall over the edge of the pulpit and land, safely, on the carpeted floor just behind the communion table in a heap of dust and splinters and clerical robes. A wee man got up to help greeting him with the immortal words 'That's what you get for praising the Lord in this church!'

As I say I do hope it is an apocryphal story. I expect it is. Praising the Lord is something we should be doing week by week and day by day. It is something that should be a hallmark of the church. When others think of the Church it should be of a place and a body of people who are known for their joy. There are always things to give thanks for, things that are bigger and better and more permanent than the passing circumstances of life that may cast a shadow. The verses from Ephesians stand as a permanent record of things that are always true and always worth rejoicing over. Mind you they are not written in such a way as makes them easy to get excited over. Paul's style does sometimes mitigate against his content – I wonder what he was like as a preacher? Lengthy, of course, we know that – but maybe not immediately gripping!

So why might we be shouting hallelujah – or at least thinking it with Scottish restraint? Firstly God has blessed us in Jesus, in giving us Jesus, with every blessing in the heavenly places. A blessing is a good thing, that is how you would define a blessing and in giving us Jesus God has given us the very best things in his realm, his kingdom, his place – he has given us the good thing which is his Son. What a gift! Praise the Lord!

He did this because he chose us in Christ, in Jesus, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love. What a lot there is there! We are chosen, not as a last minute thing, not the way some people choose their Christmas presents as the shops are closing on Christmas Eve, but with eternal thought and planning. God really wants us, he really want you. We are chosen to be set apart – that's holy, and blameless. Hmm. How often have you blamed yourself for doing the wrong thing? You were probably right. How often have other people blamed you – they were probably right as well. (This is beginning to sound a bit Scottish and Presbyterian again!) But in Christ, we are blameless because he takes away our sin and our blame, in his love. Our Gospel friends might be shouting "Hallelujah!"

That planning of God meant that he destined us for adoption into his family, according to the good pleasure of his will – he didn't adopt us reluctantly, because someone had to and it was his bounden duty as God. He did it because he really wanted to, because adopting us into his family brings him joy – I do hope every adoptive parent can (and does) say that to their child. To the praise of his glorious grace, says Paul, in other words "Praise the Lord!"

He gives us redemption, being bought back from our former ways, from our former worthlessness, and we have forgiveness. That's a thump the lectern moment of "Amen" surely. And as if that weren't enough, God is pleased to reveal his will to us, his mysterious will which so many people have sought after for so long. He has shown us his plan to gather all things up and unite them in Jesus. God's plan for the world, God's answer for the world, is Jesus, who he is and what he did and how he changed things. He has shown us his plan to give us Jesus, and everything gathered up into him as our inheritance. We are incredibly rich and blessed, blessed in a real way.

I understand that in southern parts of the united States, the ubiquitous "Have a nice day" is now often replaced with the phrase "Be blessed." And I can imagine that this might begin to grate and become meaningless after you have heard it half a hundred times. But we are blessed. God has given us his very best in Jesus, not just on a one-off basis, at Christmas time a couple of thousand years ago. He is giving us his very best every day in Jesus. So we really should shout "Hallelujah!", even if the church falls down in surprise.

There are still people who have things happen which make them sad, and you may be one of them and this may be one of your sad times. By praising God we are not making light of your trouble; by asking you to give thanks to God despite it, it will not go away. But it may gain a little perspective. There are still troubled places in the world and times when we know that great wrong is done, that real evil still has a foothold in this world. Praising and blessing God for his permanent blessings given us in Jesus – as well as personal blessings that come our way – can be the fuel that feeds our impetus to work for good, to make a difference in the world. It can be the best way of all to turn back evil and unseat it from its bases of power. Praise is actually practical, so let us vow to make 2014 a year of praise, no matter what. Amen.