

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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LIFT UP YOUR EYES

17th November 2013

Isaiah 65:17-25

Luke 21: 5-19

At our presbytery meeting at the beginning of this month, we were talking a little about a paper sent out by the Church of Scotland's Ministries Council, which was attempting to help the churches – and that means the people in the churches, which is you and me – to come to grips with the idea that although things are changing, although there are and there are going to be fewer ministers than most of us would ideally hope for, yet the church itself can still flourish and thrive.

In the course of the short discussion at the presbytery meeting, the Rev. Richard Gillings made a comment. Richard, who is a supposedly retired Episcopalian priest, attends presbytery as our ecumenical representative, to keep us from getting too inward looking, to remind us that the Church of Scotland is not the only church in Scotland. On this occasion he did just that, by reminding us that although all the churches are facing changes and being forced to look at how we do ministry – which is no bad thing: we would never look at it seriously if we were not forced to! - yet when we work together we are strong, and when we remember that the goal is not the continuation of what we have at present, or of any one denomination, but the furtherance of the good news of Jesus in this part of the world, then we get our eyes focussed aright.

It was something we needed and need to hear. The church is not about the structures, or the buildings, or the bodies or traditions. It is about the good news of Jesus setting free the people of this generation; binding them together as the children of God.

This was the sort of lift-up-your-eyes, wake-up-and-smell-the-coffee moment which the writer of Isaiah 65 wanted to give his hearers. The beginning of the book of Isaiah was written by Isaiah son of Amos beginning in the year that King Uzziah died, so in the 8th century B.C. However there are later parts of the prophecy which have been continued by others, who do not give their names because they see themselves as continuing the work of Isaiah. And by the time we get where we were reading today it is pretty obvious that the situation which is being addressed is now the same situation that Haggai was addressing when we read some of his words last week. The people have been returned from exile in Babylon for some time now; the temple as been rebuilt – though not as well or as beautifully as the old temple; there are people living in Jerusalem again, but still there are heaps of rubble and desolate properties which have never been re-claimed. Life is OK, but it lacks something. It lacks hope and direction; people wonder when it will ever be as good as it used to be.

And this prophet, who speaks in the tradition of Isaiah who saw the glory of God in his temple, says “Wait! Look up, look out, look around. It's not going to be as it was, because it is going to be better. It is going to be different, but it is going to be better.” Lift up your eyes. Wake up and smell the coffee brewing. Stop looking to the past, stop thinking that God's plans are all about the stones of the city of Jerusalem – God is far bigger and greater than that. God is doing something new.

The prophet is not talking here about life in heaven, although some of his description is certainly idyllic. But he is talking about a new order on earth, when instead of looking back with longing, people forget the old things in the delight of the new. He is talking about God restoring the balance and perfection of creation. We know that this was done only through the life and death of Jesus. We too should lift up our eyes, wake up and smell the coffee brewing, because we live in the time when God is bringing this new thing to birth. We are part of its birthing.

Jesus is talking of that new thing as well, and he, far more than the old prophet, is talking about the difficulty of the birth pangs of the new in the face of the tenacity of the old. He begins his teaching, his reflection about things when someone in his hearing starts doing a sort of guided tour of the temple, pointing out its beauty, its fine crafting, its decoration and stone-work. This was not the same version of the temple that our Isaiah prophet knew: the temple had been through various tumultuous events in the time of Greek rule, but less than 20 years before we see Jesus there, it had been substantially renovated and improved by Herod the Great. It was still fresh and new enough to be a matter of wonder, and so someone is pointing out the notable features of the building.

But Jesus responds to this rehearsal of the temple's beauty by foretelling its destruction – and it is worth noting that this took place in 70 A.D., so was still a recent event when Luke wrote his gospel, something his readers would have known about, have remembered. Jesus foretells the destruction of the temple, because the temple was supposed to be about people coming close to God; but they had him now, they had God living and walking and talking among them. They didn't need the temple and they would never need it again. In any case, when people come to the place which was supposed to help them come close to God and instead spent time in architectural survey, then it showed that the temple was no longer fulfilling its purpose. Religious display comes to an end when it ignores the One for whom it exists.

This sort of radical talk was just what some of the disciples had been waiting to hear, so they are full of eager questions – when will it happen? What will be the sign? They mean sign in the sky – conjunction of planets, or display of shooting stars or something like that. But the sign had just happened: the word of God was in the temple and people looked at the stones. This was the sign that something new was needed, was at the door: the old had run its course, had outlived its usefulness.

The problem we have with the idea of something new, is that we cannot imagine it. It is new. We get used to having advertising thrown at us all day long, which tells of this or that new, or newly improved product, and we know that they are not new, not radically. “New improved taste” claims the tub of margarine, and you can't taste any difference at all. Indeed recently I saw one margarine advertising that they had returned to the taste you know and love! Most of the claims to newness in the products that people wish to sell us are not radically new. They are improvements on the old, maybe, supposedly, but they are not new. And all the claims of newness that we encounter may actually stop us being able to recognise the really new, the new thing of God, when we meet it, just as Jesus went unheeded in the temple.

In these past couple of months we have been looking at what the prophets, those voices of God to a people whose faith and familiarity was under attack, might have to say to a Christian church whose faith and familiarity is also facing difficult times. As we have done so the call to repent has come to us more than once in different way – that call to turn from the ways of the world to focussing better on Jesus, on God. We have also heard words of reassurance, and we have seen that the promise is not always that our circumstances will change, but that God will be with us as with him we face what can seem impossible challenges.

Today we are told to lift up our eyes, to wake up and smell that coffee brewing, because the challenges we face means that God is working a new thing. He is not restoring a version of the old – the time for that is now past. He is bringing in something new. We are called to look with hope and expectation to the future. We are called to look outwards, not inwards. If there is one thing that the church in general and most churches in particular are good at, it is looking inwards. We look at our own problems, our own challenges and we worry. We forget to look outward to the problems and challenges of the world to see what we can do to help. We forget that we are not the whole church, both here and in the wider world. We forget that Jesus, the Word of God is walking beside us, in the midst of us, and ahead of us, leading us into God's new ideas.

What we most forget is that God has promised that the new things he has planned and that he is, sometimes through great suffering, bringing into the world, are good. We who don't believe in the new things advertised, who are essentially conservative at heart so often forget that God would not give us a bad new thing. It was Jesus who, knowing our fear of the new, maybe, said “Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:11-13)

Where did we get the idea that God is out to get us? Where did we get the idea that our loving heavenly Father wants to give us a hard time. Hard times do come: “Nations will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be great earthquakes, and in various places famines and plagues...” Jesus gave these examples of hard times, and week by week we could put specific place names to them, but Jesus wasn't talking of these things to say that God was out to hurt and harm. He wanted his followers to know that these need not be feared as part of God's judgement, as signs that in wrath God was ending the world. He gives examples too of personal hard times which his listeners will undergo, but he reassures that God will be with them in it, that they will be given words in difficult situations, that in real terms not a hair on their heads will perish.

God is bringing about new things on the earth, good things, the Kingdom of God itself. But that is so radical, so opposed to the way of self-interest by which the structures of the world work, that we can forget that if we lift up our eyes and look, what we will see is that God's way is good. God's new things, unknown in specific and personal detail as they are need not be feared but can be embraced, because they are good. So this morning, take heart. Do as God says and be glad and rejoice forever in what he is creating. Amen.