

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

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **STEWARDSHIP OF TALENTS, TABERNACLE - 1**

**23<sup>rd</sup> June 2013**

Exodus 35:4-19,  
1 Corinthians 12:14-26

At the St. Bride's Session meeting this week, Ross Noble, who is a fine historian, gave us a run-down on the main points of the history of the church in the Newtonmore area – which later became the parish. You will soon be able to read his work either online or in a booklet which is to be left in the church for visitors. One of the things he commented on was the way that the stones from what was St. Columba's church, in Station Road were used along with the structure of St. Andrew's church, where the church now sits, to make St. Bride's church. And I thought about the vision and skills that were needed to make the two buildings as much one as the two congregations already were. And then he mentioned the windows and the art-work in the church, and I thought of the people, some known, some forgotten, who put their vision and skill into practice to make these.

When we tell the story of Laggan church someone usually points out the height of the building, and the height of the pulpit, and makes the comment that the pillars supporting the balcony are as high as they are because the trees used were so very tall (which has always puzzled me as an explanation – could they not have been cut shorter? Maybe the point is that the pillars are each made of single tree-trunks, not several pieces melded together.) Again skill and vision and theological understanding – they were very careful that someone standing in the pulpit should be eye-ball to eye-ball with the Laird sitting in his gallery, neither above nor below! For generations people have appreciated and used what the skills of the Laggan church builders achieved, and for fewer generations what the congregations of St. Andrew's and St. Columba's produced together.

Today we read about the beginnings of the building of, not a church, but a tabernacle – the tent for meeting with God. The people were asked to give, first of all, to give gold, silver and bronze – not everyone would have that. And to give blue, purple and crimson yarns, and fine linen – some people would have been hoarding such things for the time when they had a settled life again. They were to give goats' hair, and tanned rams' skins and leather – and all sorts of people could help give that; and acacia wood, oil, spices and gemstones. Different things were needed and even the poorest could be involved in the giving.

But if there were those who could give more than others, or whose gifts might be more admired because they were more valuable, the next stage of the creation involved a different kind of giving – the giving of talents and skills. We have been thinking about the stewardship of our talents this month, and we have here a very clear example of how different talents were needed to work together to do what was fitting for God.

The Hebrews needed to find those who could sew – sew goat skins together as well as sewing fine linens. They needed those who could weave and those who could embroider. And then there were the metal-workers whose skills were required: workers in bronze and in precious metals. They needed those who could polish and cut the gemstones, they needed those who could work with wood. And – did you notice? – they also needed those who could press olive oil and who could bake bread. There were jobs for all sorts of people. If we had read to the end of the chapter we could have seen that since all these people could not just get on with it without some sort of plan or person coordinating them - can you imagine the resultant mess? - God had told Moses that he had given the talents to bring the work together to Bezalel and Oholiab, who were both skilled craftsmen and could oversee the work.

All sorts of people needed and in the end a work of lasting beauty and usefulness was produced. This tabernacle was to be the place where the worship of God was centred all through the journeying in the wilderness, all through the time of the judges, all through the reigns of Saul and David, until Solomon built the temple. It was a portable shrine and was made with the generous, but willing giving in time, talent and money of the people. In this it was unlike the temple which was built with forced labour. I wonder if that is why the tabernacle, and the worship conducted there was never a centre of such controversy as that which too often surrounded the temple.

When the tabernacle was completed, some parts of the work would have been more immediately noticeable than others. It was designed to be eye-catching, with the gold parts catching the sun and the bright colours of the embroidery gleaming on the more sombre background of goat-hair and tanned leather skins. The leather curtains which made up the walls, and which were joined by bronze clasps, covered the inner splendour of curtains of linen, worked with cherubim in blue, purple and crimson and joined by hoops of blue and gold clasps. When you went in to the tent these curtains would have caught the eye and taken away the breath with their glory and splendour. Few people would even look at the well-made poles of acacia wood which held them up. In the tabernacle was the gold-plated ark of the covenant, with the winged cherubim arching over it protectively, and the gold-plated altar. Seeing these, who would think of the woodworking skill that lay beneath the covering of gold?

And when the incense was burned, who would remember the person who pressed the oil and infused the herbs and spices to give the smoke its scent? And when the bread was offered, who remembered the person who baked it each day? And yet their talents were as necessary as those who embroidered, or polished stones or worked the gold.

This morning we also read part of Paul's famous analogy of the church as the body of Christ, with each piece, each member, different but equally necessary. Part of what he is saying is that when we look on a person, we see the outward part of the body, and only part of that, usually. We see a person's head and hands and maybe feet – possibly parts of the legs and the arms. But the rest of the body, outer and inner is covered up, whether by clothes or by skin. We do not see a person's heart or liver or intestines – and thank goodness for that you may think, because finding the beauty in such things is a taste few of us have had the necessity or opportunity to acquire. And we are not too fond of displaying our wobbly bits or private bits either. But they are part of us, and without them we would not be who we are.

When it comes to thinking about the stewardship of our talents, it is as well to remember that there are the talents which are obvious, and which we think of very quickly when we think of serving God or advancing his kingdom. There are the gifts of speech or song, of painting or sculpture, of caring or praying. But what of the other talents which God needs to advance his kingdom? What of those who can build with their hands, and be practical? What of those who can plan and make sure the

right things happen in the right order? What of the person who quietly gets on with cleaning up or making the tea? What of the person who listens and sympathises? What of the ones who brighten the lives of others by their skills with gardening and flower arranging? What of those who quietly knit for children who would otherwise have no new clothes? What of those who write letters to cheer and encourage, or to bring injustice to the attention of authority? What of those who give love to children? Or to older people, unseen, largely unknown, but not unappreciated by those who are helped by them.

There are all sorts of talents which are not seen immediately when we look at the work of God, but which are essential to the church's mission and ministry. Just as when we first come into the church here we don't immediately notice the heating, unless it isn't working and we are cold, so some of these more hidden talents are the kind of things that you don't notice until they aren't there. And then you notice all right. Then there is a void, and then the rest of the church doesn't hang together so well.

Paul's point is that there is no one, no one, in the church who we can do without. Think about that the next Sunday morning when you are tempted to think that no one will notice if you are not there. There is no one we can do without and still be whole and well and effective in our worship and service. The only time that is not true is when God removes a person from us, either by calling them home to be with him, or by prompting them to move on to serve him elsewhere. But if you are not dead yet, and you have no inkling that you ought to move away, then your place is here and without you we will not be ourselves.

That is why being part of the church is not like joining a club. When we decide to follow Jesus, responding to his call to us, we are allowing him to place and position us in his body, the church. And everyone who is part of his body is important, not just to the other parts of the body, but to Christ Jesus himself, who is the head of the body. Next week in our worship we will be encouraging each other in the giving of our talents and skills to the work of God. We will be helping each other to see the gifts which God has given us. We will be thinking of just how wonderful it is when we work together.

The Hebrew people in the desert were a wandering nomadic folk, with just what they could carry with them. But by giving together and working together they made a place fit to be used to worship God himself, in beauty and glory and in lasting stability and practical design. Working together with what God has given us, which may not look very much to us, we too can make his church – the people, the ministry, as well as the building – a thing of beauty and joy and glory for those who as yet know little of our God and how to respond to him and live for him in worship.