

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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LOOKING FORWARD IN FAITH

17th March 2013

Psalm 126.

Isaiah 43:15-21.

Philippians 3:4b-14

One of the things that children have to learn as they grow up is how to manage their money. As parents we want to teach them how to save and how to spend wisely; how to budget and plan; how to keep track of things, maybe with a simple account book that records money in and money out. Positives and negatives. Profit and loss.

Paul, who had been in business as a tent maker, had, I think, some sort of profit and loss system in mind when he wrote this part of his letter to the Philippians. He counts up all the things that he has valued and cherished, things which would have been on the profit side of a ledger, and they are not his flat-screen telly, nor his Jag. He talks of his circumcision, which was a badge of belonging; of his lineage, his family, his nationality, his religious affiliation, his zeal in practising that religion and his virtue. He is talking about who he is, his whole identity as a Jew, a good Jew, one of the chosen people. In the end for most of us who we are is important. And it has been for Paul. But now he has met Jesus. Now everything has changed for him. Now the things which were profit have become, not just less important, not even neutral, but actually losses to him.

Paul, it seems, has taken to heart Isaiah's admonition not to remember the former things, or consider the things of old. (V:18). Paul is looking ahead. Not just looking, but straining ahead with every ounce of his being, every nerve ending tensed and waiting and longing. He talks in terms of pressing on and straining forward. That is what the psalmist is doing as well in the short psalm which we read today.

Psalm 126 is one of the psalms of ascent, psalms designed to be sung on pilgrimage, going up to Jerusalem. We have read it in the season of Lent, which is a season of pilgrimage. In Lent we watch with Jesus in the wilderness, and we travel with him, especially in the last weeks of Lent, towards Jerusalem. When Jesus went up to Jerusalem on his final journey, it was a pilgrimage for him - a journey with its origins and purpose rooted in God, in God's worship and in doing God's will.

This song of ascent which we read today is in two parts. The first part looks back. "When The Lord stored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouths were filled with

laughter and our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, 'The Lord has done great things for them.' "

The psalmist is looking back, maybe to the exodus, maybe to the return from exile. He or she is looking back to a time when there was trouble, so much trouble that when things turned around for the better for God's people, not only they, but all the other peoples and nations around were forced to recognise the power and love of God. Good things to have in your past history, then; good times to look back on, and from which you can draw strength.

But there is a danger of having a faith which is only rooted in history. There is a danger of having a faith rooted only in even the events which underlie our faith. In this church, as in most churches, we have come to expect to see more people come to worship on Christmas Eve and on Easter Sunday. There are all sorts of reasons for this, but underlying many of them, is the fact that on these days above all, we look to the foundational events of our faith: Jesus' incarnation and his death and resurrection. It is always lovely to see the church full, and yet we know that we cannot count on those who turn up for these services to be there in the following weeks, or to be involved in our mission to the parish and the world. Because faith that looks only to the past, even to God's wonderful work in the past, is not faith that is growing, active and finding ways to be relevant in the present and for the future.

In the same way there is a danger in having our faith rooted in the history of our denomination. About a year ago I had a very odd phone call from someone purporting to have come to live in Newtonmore. (I don't think he had, I think he was somewhere else, just phoning ministers at random to see what reaction he would get.). In a strong Irish accent he began to tell me why his family would never go anywhere near a Roman Catholic Church. In the end I interrupted him to say that if he was in the village he would be welcome in the church, but so would anyone else, including as many Roman Catholics who wanted to come, and that I thought he and his family were missing out on some of God's best gifts by closing their mind and their love to any part of his church. The phone was put down.

Most of us would not be so extreme, at least in conversation. But if our faith is in the Church of Scotland, or in being Protestant, then it is unlikely to be as rooted in God as it should be, and so likely to be stunted in its health and growth. I had an email a couple of months ago from Canada, from two elderly sisters who had been baptised by a previous minister in Newtonmore, and were arguing about whether they were baptised into the Church of Scotland or the Protestant Church. I replied that they had been baptised in a protestant Church of Scotland, but baptised into the universal church of Jesus Christ, and that this was what matters! Faith that is rooted in the history of our denomination need not always be expressed in such extreme ways; faith rooted in denomination or our church can find expression in statements like "That's my seat." Or "We've always done it like that."

The Psalmist knows this. That is why this is a Psalm in two parts: the second part looks to the future and is rooted in the present. "Restore our fortunes, O God, like the watercourses in the Negeb. May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy." This is a psalm which looks back only to get reassurance that God can do it again. God has restored the fortunes of his people before and he is more than capable of doing it again. But it will not necessarily be in the same way. This, I think, is why the Psalmist does not specify which of God's past interventions he or she is holding in mind in the first part of the Psalm. The idea is not to provide a blue-print for how God is going to act in the future. It is to give hope that God, who did a new thing before can do a new thing again.

In Lent, we travel and we look forward as well, we are on a pilgrimage, making our ascent, as we look forward to Easter. When I was a child I used to look forward to Easter because I would be given a chocolate egg. And because the schools had a holiday, and because my parents liked to arrange a treasure hunt round the garden on Easter Sunday. But now I look forward to Easter far more than I did then, even though it means the opposite of a holiday for me. I hope that you look forward to Easter with an adult and fervent expectation as well.

Why would we do that? Is it because it should mean that Spring is with us again? Is it because then Lent will be over? If you have taken on or given up something for Lent which you have found to be difficult, there might be an element of that in it, though I would hope that however you have marked this season, it has been in a way which has also brought you close to God and so brought you joy.

What I hope we look forward to about Easter, is that then, supremely then, we celebrate that God has done, and is doing a new thing. In raising Jesus from the dead God did a very new thing. The resurrection of Jesus is, of course, a unique thing, a one-off event, but it is also a new thing which goes on being new. One of the mottoes of the reformed churches is that we are a church *semper reformata*. We are always being reformed. The sixteenth century and seventeenth century reformers knew that the new thing God began at Easter, the new thing that they were doing with their reforms, would not be finished and made complete until the end of the world. It would keep on growing and developing, keep showing new truth, keep becoming relevant to new situations, new ages of the world.

This is the point in our reading from Isaiah as well. The prophet looks to the past, to the exodus, and then says "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?" God does not expect his people to be always looking backwards over their shoulders. He expects us to look forward, to remember what God has done in the past, but not to let that blinker our vision, set boundaries to what we expect of God in the future, nor to prevent us seeing what he is already doing in the present.

We are now in the second half of Lent, and soon it will be Holy Week, when we do look to the past, when we remember the events of the last week of Jesus' life. But if Jesus' life is to go on having meaning for us today, then we need to learn to look back only so that we may learn how to look forward. We need to learn how to get to know God through what he has done in the past, only so that we are best able to recognise what he is doing in the present, what he is pointing to for the future. God grant that our faith be rooted in him, and able to move where he moves, so that, like Paul we may forget what lies behind – including the hurt we may have suffered or have caused – and, looking to Jesus, strain forward to what lies ahead.

Amen.