

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

PEARLS BEFORE SWINE

25th Oct 2015

Matthew 7:1-11
Ephesians 2:13-22

This morning in St. Bride's we have the great joy of baptising Lukas into the family of God. Now Lukas is just a baby, of course, so he doesn't understand what we have been doing and he won't remember it. But as he grows up and is brought around the church, for Rhyme Time, to Messy Church, to Sunday morning church, to whatever the church may be doing in the future, he will draw his own conclusions about this church, about what kind of a church his parents have brought him to.

I wonder what he will think? I wonder what kind of a church Lukas will think he has become a part of?

The chances are that at some point, maybe when he is in his teenage years, he will think that there is too much formality here, or that the church is not in touch with who he is or who his friends are or how the world is for them. I hope not, but I fear that he will. I know we don't think of ourselves this way, but then we are on the inside. I heard recently a horribly good description of how church culture tends to work. Apparently, if you take a collection of fleas and put them in a jar with the lid tightly on, and leave them for a couple of days they do not all die, which was my first thought. But in that time they have become used to living within the context of the jar, with restraints about where they can go, how high they can jump. If you then take off the lid, the fleas will not jump out. They could, if they wanted to - fleas can jump quite high. But they won't. Moreover if you leave them in that jar, with the lid off (so that they don't die) their children will never jump above the level of the jar top either. Whole new generations of fleas will have their behaviour modified, and never know why.

Is that what the church is about? Is it about behaviour modification? When we teach Lukas how to be a good boy, how to follow Jesus are we in fact teaching him to be like us, without questioning whether that is the best or the only way for him to be? I would hope not, and I expect that hearing it put that way you would hope not too, but we can go on and act without thought too often.

So what is the church? Paul tells us that we are a group of people who have been brought together by being brought near to Christ. We are people who primarily and sometimes only have in common that we believe ourselves loved by God and saved, brought near to him, by the death and resurrection of Jesus. Paul tells us that it is only as we remain in touch with Jesus, that the church will grow. It doesn't grow with our planning and plotting, though we can make very good plans, but only as we allow God to give life to us together. The church is a living thing, a dynamic thing, and as such it is a mystery.

Church as mystery, that means that it will not always be familiar. You see, we should not be fleas jumping to the height of the jar lid, nor their descendants, who have never seen the lid but still repeat the behaviour. We should be people who live in a community of sobornost. Sobornost is a term used for when a group of people work together spiritually without sacrificing their individuality. Sobornost is what many people are afraid that they will not find in the church, that there will be a need to conform asked of them, which will stifle who they are.

This is why I had us read from Matthew's gospel today, why I had us read "Do not give what is holy to dogs; and do not throw your pearls before swine, or they will trample them underfoot and turn and maul you."

Have you ever wondered what that might mean? What are pearls? Well you know, ladies wear them around their necks or hanging from their ears, if they are rich. They are a very valuable jewel, because they are not hewn out of the ground like diamonds or other precious stones, but they are formed by oysters as a reaction or defence against a foreign body or irritant, usually a piece of sand or grit which has got into the soft tissues. Bluish-grey layers form around the unwanted intruder and the final product of these repeated accretions is the hard, translucent gem that we know and that has always been thought to be of great monetary value.

We don't have grit in our soft tissues, like the oyster, or if we do, if we get a speck in our eye we tend to get rid of it - and should before we offer to help someone with anything they have in theirs. But we do have grit in our lives, troubling grit. All of us have weaknesses and negative influences which come very close to moving into our inner lives and ruining us. Some of them may go back to childhood, but their effect is timeless. Most of you have been round the Highland Folk Park and when you have done so, I am sure that you have seen things that remind you of what your parents or grandparents had or did. I go into the summer house and it is furnished almost entirely, so it seems, with items from my grandmother's kitchen. When you happen on that familiar thing it can bring back not just the facts but the feelings associated with that memory - whether it is a good memory with happiness, or a bad one with fear, or sadness. You have probably had that experience. It can come too with a smell or a taste. It can come with the tone in a person's voice or a pattern in the clouds, but for a moment the effect is dramatic and as blinding as the flash on a camera going off full in your face. You are back to wherever it was and you are reacting to life with the emotions of that past day.

We all have our difficult dark invaders, our grit, the things which cause pain, which we do not enjoy, which we wish were not there. There are all sorts of ways of coping with them, and the most common is to try and pretend that in fact they are not there, that they do not exist, that we do not have anything wrong in our perfect lives. But if we do acknowledge them, if we bring them to God, - whether it is a temptation or a failure, an annoyance or a memory which will not die and continues to cow your inner child - if we bring them to God, chances are he will not take them away. Sometimes he does, but often he doesn't, because God is good enough to allow us to go on being the persons that we are. Instead he builds up a pearl of protection around our vulnerable places. He allows us to continue to be vulnerable, which means to be human, but in his grace he makes our very vulnerabilities beautiful, and, in his eyes and in the work of his kingdom, even valuable. God values the things which make us individuals, even if they are the things which could, if not protected, destroy us.

And in sobernost God calls us to work together, to be together, yes, but not to sacrifice who we are to some sort of group mentality or personality. Sobernost. Jesus called his first disciples to follow him as they were, and they seem to have remained a very different bunch. He calls us as we are as well. We may have grief, or bitterness, insecurity, low self-esteem or unrealistically high self-esteem. We may have difficult things in our past or in our present. We may be gay or straight, men or women, single or not. Jesus calls us with all that baggage on our backs and we hope and pray that God will do something to ease our burdens. And God takes those burdens and makes the a precious and valuable part of who we are: vulnerabilities that tell the world, that we are human but God still loves us: vulnerabilities that reassure each other that we are none of us perfect, but God still loves us.

Pearls are valuable things. They are beautiful and they are what you get when God transfigures things that could have turned very ugly. Whatever we do, we mustn't let anyone take them away from us, or devalue the work that God is doing in us, the beauty he is making while we still remain ourselves. Anyone who would do that, even if they mean it for our own good, is the swine who do not value the pearls in the first place. Perhaps it is sad that the church has too often taken that role, the role of the old fashioned teacher o f handwriting who would seek to drill out all individuality, or the role of the jar that surrounds the fleas, and teaches them to be less than they could be, or different from what they were intended to be.

Lukas has become part of a church full of imperfect people. And that is just as well, as he is not going to be perfect himself - though he can look like it just now, especially when he is asleep. He will know what it is to be hurt and frightened, to think himself not good enough, and wonder if he really is loved. We all do that, some do it in more damaging ways than others. But we hope and pray that God will hold him through these things, and grow the pearls within him that are a sign of God's love to him that will be there always, no matter what.

And that is what kind of a church he is part of. It is the only kind of church there is really, no matter what the size or shape of the jar that would modify our behaviour. Any church is really a collection of people working together in sobernost, working for the good of their own spiritual lives and for the good of their community and of the world, working in harmony with God, but still remaining individuals with gifts, talents, histories - and pearls. No wonder the church is a mystery. It changes when anyone joins it and becomes a part of its life. Each one of you who are a part of this church have changed who it is, and that is good and how it should be. Our prayer is that Lukas will also be able to change it, and in so doing he will know himself to be loved - by us but most of all by the God who has brought him into the world and has brought him into his church. Amen.