

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

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## **THE HOUSE OF GOD**

**19<sup>th</sup> July 2015**

Mark 6:30-34

Eph 2:11-22.

Last week I was on holiday, and a great thing for a holidaying minister is to attend worship and sit in the pews. Personally I also quite like to attend a church of a different Christian tradition. So last Sunday Alan and I attended evensong in St. Luke's church in St. Helier, Jersey. I enjoyed the service, with music and prayers - and most of the prayers were sung as well - but I also had time to let my eyes stray around the building. St. Luke's would seem to be fairly high up the liturgical candle, as it were, in that we were greeted with the odour of left over incense, and there were stations of the cross adorning the wall, which you don't find in every Church of England. It had various arrangements where people could stop by and pray at any time when the building was open. And it had lovely windows and good art and was comfortable and welcoming. I liked it.

Even then I was beginning to reflect on our Scripture readings for today, including the story we have already thought about of God rejecting the idea of David building him a house. And I was thinking about the little vignette Mark shows us of Jesus and his disciples needing a bit of peace and quiet, and simply not finding it, because in their need the people still came to them. And I was thinking about Paul's words to the Ephesians about how they are, or are becoming, God's dwelling place. Twenty centuries and more after Paul and a good millennium beyond that from David, these are challenging words for us. For so long we have had church buildings, and have very often referred to them as "the house of God" that it is hard for our minds to let go of that concept. And yet, in his words to David, God is quite clear that he does not need a house built for him, and that he cannot be limited to special holy places.

I was thinking about that last Sunday evening and as I looked around St. Luke's I realised that clean and numinous and comfortable and slightly alien as it was, and as most churches are, it was not a building built for God but for his children. It was built to help people set aside time and concentration to worship God, whether by using the pews on a Sunday and doing it all together, or by using the bank of candles or the written prayer requests at the prie dieu, in individual devotions. Our churches are designed for that as well. Like many, most, Presbyterian churches we focus on the table and the pulpit, since Word and Sacrament are the ways we expect to meet with God when we come together in worship. In St. Brides the Session is beginning to think about how the side aisle could be developed as a place for people to use for private devotions since the church is open by day. Some churches are plain to the point of austerity, without even an instrument to lead praise, while others are baroque masterpieces of gilt and art and the most magnificent music, but all of them are designed in various ways to help us to concentrate on God. Some of the newer independent churches which are springing up, mainly in the cities, prefer to meet in a building that is nothing like a

traditional church – in a school hall or a even a warehouse. One, in Inverness, does not use the word “Church” in its name, calling itself “The Kings' Factory”, but still their buildings, whether they own them or not, are places to help God's children come together and worship, whether with many visual, aural, even olfactory stimuli, or with none.

Our church buildings are not houses of God, but houses of God's people, and that makes a great difference.

The Jews of Jesus day had meeting places like ours, called synagogues, but they also had their temple, and in the holy of holies in the temple, they did believe that God's presence was stronger. But Jesus did not spend his time hanging around the temple – although he went there when it was appropriate. No, Jesus was out and about where the people were. He was in the towns and villages, and, as we saw a couple of weeks ago, he sent his disciples to go there too, teaching and healing and doing his work. Now they have come back and they are excited. They want to tell him and each other how they had got on, tell the amazing or the funny or the thought-provoking stories, just as a group of friends with a purpose would want to do, when they got together. And Jesus wanted to hear them talk, and maybe to help them reflect on what they had experienced, but the place they met up - and we are not told where exactly it was – was just so busy. The success of the disciples' mission can perhaps be seen in that there were so many people coming and going that they couldn't even get leisure to eat. The disciples had gone to talk about Jesus, and people had perhaps followed them back to find him for themselves.

So Jesus proposes that they take a short break, a time out together. In this summer season, when many of us take a holiday, when we welcome people who are holidaying into our communities, we should remember that Jesus knew the need that we have to get rest, to get relaxation, and to get reflective time. Jesus took his friends and they set off in a boat to a place which was usually deserted. But there is one problem about going by boat anywhere on a lake, especially a lake like the Sea of Galilee, which is fairly round and doesn't have a craggy coastline, and that is that everyone around the lake can see you on it and can work out where you might be heading for. And so the disciples only had a brief period of respite during the actual journey, because the people who had seen them go, worked out which direction they were travelling and hurried on foot to be there to meet them.

And Jesus had compassion on them because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. It is one of the most telling phrases to describe Jesus' ministry and his love for people. He has compassion. He sees the aimlessness of so many human lives, sees that this crowd is running after him, not because they know what they are looking for. Not because they really know what he is about, but because he is new and he is different and what else are they to run after, but the new and the different? And if that sounds familiar it is because people have not changed a lot in all the intervening years.

Jesus did not hide himself away in the temple, where only some people could get at him, he was where they were. God has never hidden himself away in buildings either, although we have sometimes tried to keep him there, keep him in his place, as it were, and not allowed ourselves to look for him and find him in the everyday circumstances of life. But it is in the everyday things, big and small, that we need God, not just in the

“religious” part of our lives, and so it is in the everyday, in the places where we are that Jesus meets with us, now as much as then. His compassion for us is no less than it was for the helpless people of his own day.

Yet God does have a temple, a house, but it is not, as he says to David, one made by human hands. It is made by and in human hearts. Paul tells his readers that they, we, are no longer strangers and aliens to God but citizens and members of the household of God. He pictures that household as a great building, held together by Jesus and growing, not being artificially made, but organically growing into a holy temple, a dwelling place for God. When we come together in our church buildings, or in any building, when we come together as Christians, we are being reminded that we are the place where God lives, in each one of us, but especially as diverse people are brought together to worship and work and witness.

The people Paul was writing to were Greeks, and he knew that they would not be considered the natural children of God by his own people, the Jews. But Paul wants us all to know that the work of Jesus on the cross was a work of reconciliation. There are no first and second class citizens with God, no ranks at all. People who in ordinary life would have nothing to do with each other, people who find it hard to trust each other or get along are called to grow together into the temple of God.

Reconciliation is at the heart of the Christian gospel. The reconciliation of humanity with God, first of all; and from that the reconciling of diverse groups within human society so that we may together praise God and serve him. That is why the church was involved in setting up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. That is why the Corymeela community in Northern Ireland was set up at the height of the troubles. That is why last autumn our then Moderator, John Chalmers, said that he wanted the Church of Scotland to work to help reconcile and heal any breaches caused by the independence referendum. Reconciliation is what the Gospel of Christ Jesus is about. Meeting people where they are, socially, religiously, ideologically, economically, emotionally, and showing them the love and compassion of Jesus. Love which will not give up when the body is tired. Love which will bear with them, no matter what. Love which tells them that they are worth taking trouble over. It is that kind of love and only that kind of love, which is God's love, which is able to bring reconciliation to all kinds of complex relationships and situations. It is allowing God to grow that kind of love in us which enables us to grow into his dwelling place, where the Holy Spirit is at home and in control.

God grant that we place ourselves into his hands, to become his living dwelling place. Amen.

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