

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

GREETINGS

3rd May 2015

Psalm 133

Romans 16:1-16

Greetings, from Mirek, especially to his good friends and hosts, Jean, Ross, Donald, Campbell, Paul, Beth, Graham. Greetings too from Michal, and Marek, from Stephanie and Martina, from the Renka family and the Kirschner family, the Blecha family and the Praslička family. Greetings from the church in Libis and in Kostelec. These are just names to you, but they are names attached to people, people who have not met you but want to send you their greetings.

Greetings are what Paul also sent to various people in the church in Rome, people he may have met on his travels, which would make them travellers as well, as Paul had not yet visited Rome. On the other hand it is just as likely that some of these people were personally unknown to Paul but people and groups of which he had heard. And so he sent them his greetings. It is a funny word, greetings, and the more you think about it the stranger it can become. What do we mean when we send greetings? I think, I hope, that we mean more than just words on paper. Greetings are more, for instance, than the Hallmark card. When Christians send greetings to one another, they send love. In the terms of the Psalm we have read, greetings are a sign of brethren wishing to live in unity.

Last Sunday I was with some others in the church in Libis. It was a very special service, not only for us, but also for that small congregation and the even smaller congregation of Kostelec, which gathered with us in united worship that day. It was also the first day that the Libis church had been used by the congregation after the winter, when they meet in the church hall, or meeting room, where we were to spend a good deal of that day, as it turned out.

The church building in Libis is old, about the same age as the church in Laggan, give or take twenty years or so. It is plainly furnished with grey-painted pews on three sides, a central communion table, and a small, high pulpit, also painted grey, in the centre of the long back wall. There are deep balconies on either side, one of which houses a pipe organ and the other pews, which were used, although there was room downstairs. Unlike some other similar churches in the area, the church of Libis is decorated, not with pictures, this is a protestant church after all, but with texts written in script on the walls and on the panels which front the balconies. There is also a recent plaque on the back wall which commemorates the six hundredth anniversary of the Czech reformation, this year, with the teaching of Jan Huss.

The congregation is small. I counted just over twenty people, and although there were some regulars who were not able to be there, Mirek told me that there were also some who had come specially for our visit and the bilingual service. However, with the exception of teenagers, most age-groups were represented, and talking to the people about their church I got no sense of despair over the small numbers. Many have left the denomination over the past few years, but the church is still there, even the tiny church in Kostelec is still there.

The greetings, the love, which I bring you comes from people who have seen great changes. Over and over again people would talk about before or after the revolution of 1989, which was when communism was overthrown. We heard from Michal, who was in high school then, how teachers of Russian had suddenly to swap to teaching English, keeping one lesson ahead of the class. There was a change in the orientation of society from the East to the West, and at first with new found freedoms and choices, some useful and traditional skills were lost. The farms were neglected for a while, as people found that they could buy a much greater variety of foods from importing them. However the fields are being used again now, and there was what looked like a good crop of asparagus and of oil-seed rape growing. The rape was also providing fertile territory for Pavel's commercial bee-keeping business.

As we were shown around it became clear that change had been a constant in this country. Radical change, not the gradual change that is true everywhere. We were told of changes in culture, which happened when communism took over at the end of the second world war, and shown pictures of the open-air swimming pools in typical country retreats from the inter-war era which suddenly disappeared, as the mountain retreats from city life which had been so popular were deemed to be capitalist, and as people were moved around the country, so that the local traditions were hard to maintain. But the castles have survived, and the Czech people seem very proud of their castles.

But there were other great changes which happened before the twentieth century. We heard about the Holy Roman Empire, how the Czech-lands were for a long time part of this great political force which covered most of central Europe. In the time of Emperor Charles 4th, Prague was the capital of the empire, but that later moved to Vienna, with Maria Theresa, and the Czechs believe this is why they have been able to keep so many of their old buildings in Page. It was not a capital city, no one remembered about it or wanted to show their power within it, and so the old buildings went on being used.

We heard about the time of the reformation, when most of the Czech lands became Protestant. But not too long after that the ruling dynasty changed to become the Hapsburgs, who were strongly Catholic, and so the Protestant faith suffered suppression. Laws were passed saying that a Protestant church must have no tower and no door on the main street. Most of the doors of the older buildings are at the side or the back.

On Sunday afternoon last week we went for a walk in a thunderstorm, which ended up at the old Catholic church in Libis. It is a tiny building which at the time of the reformation became Protestant, still the only church for the village. The remarkable frescos it contains were inadvertently preserved by the Protestants lime-washing the walls! During the Hapsburg era the current church was built, with no tower or entrance on the main street of course. During communism religion was not encouraged and church attendance fell away. In 1989 there was a great surge of interest in all religion, traditional and sects. Many people declared themselves to be Protestant. But since then the membership has dwindled sharply. People are seeking, but not joining. Now where have we had that before? But there is no sense of despair, though there might be. If the church is still there, it can grow again. In Kostelec the church no longer has a building, and the congregation is basically a woman in her 60s and another in her 80s, who are sometimes joined for a while by this one or that one as well. They are formidable women, however! And as long as they live the church in Kostelec will not die, so that there will be a chance that God may revive it.

The church is, of course, different in different places. In Libis, for instance, the tradition of

church funerals has dwindled to almost nothing. During the communist years these were not encouraged, and in Libis the tradition of a Christian funeral seems almost to have died. Indeed, people very often have no funeral or way of saying goodbye at all, because the state system, which can still be used, is not valued. Mirek asks how can he give people back this habit, when most are afraid to think or talk about death? When he worked further from Prague, he still had many funerals, and like me, he valued the contact with people in the community. But he says that weddings are gradually increasing and he has at least one young couple in his church, whom we met, who first came to him because they wanted to be married.

Last Sunday in worship Mirek did everything in two languages. He gave us the prayers in English on a piece of paper, so that we could follow along. He sought to choose hymns of which we would at least know the tune. He had the scripture read in both languages. Ian Hall taught a song of which Mirek had arranged for the chorus to be translated in to Czech, and he and I gave the sermon, paragraph by paragraph in both languages. After the service we had coffee and cake – so much cake! - in the church hall and talked and talked. Then lunch of special noodle and meatball soup followed by goulash and sliced doughballs was served. More talking! Then after a while we went for what turned out to be a very wet walk – we timed it just wrong - and saw the Catholic church, before we all came back to the church, had more cake and showed slides and videos about this church and this area – and shinty – to the people. Finally we had our evening meal, not that we were very hungry.

A whole day at church, and it wasn't too long at all! And it was all time to get to know people better. The oldest lady from Kostelec, the young families, the various people whose greetings I brought you a few minutes ago. People who work as teachers, translators, bee-keepers, coffee-roasters, architects. People who are parents and grandparents, who have lived through change in church and society. These are the people who send greetings in Christ. The older people said it specifically, "Go in Christ" they said. These are Christian people with whom we also stand in solidarity. In the church I suddenly remembered all the times in my younger days when I heard ministers and others pray for Christians behind the iron curtain. And I looked, especially at the older people there, and realised that these were the people for whom we prayed. Let us remain faithful in prayer, let us live with mutual greetings, which is love, in our hearts, and in unity and in joy with our brothers and sisters. Amen.

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