

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

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

## **THE CHURCH'S MISSION**

**5<sup>th</sup> June 2016**

John 14:8-17

Acts 6:1-7

Last week we thought about how Jesus told his disciples that they (and we) would be his witnesses in Jerusalem, and in Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, and we thought about how this is a constant command and prophecy, as each generation of places where the good news has come still needs to hear for themselves.

This week we will think, not about geography, but about how the disciples were witnesses. What did they do that was also what Jesus did? How were they Christ-like, and what can we learn from them? Jesus himself had promised his disciples that they would do the works that he did and even greater works, because he was going to the Father. Did they? Do we? How can this be true?

After the Holy Spirit was released among the disciples, and had released them from their fear and timidity, the first thing which we find them doing is teaching, talking, telling about Jesus. This, of course, was a large part of what Jesus himself did, though he spoke less about himself than about the kingdom of God. But now that he had been resurrected, now that everything had changed, the disciples wanted to talk about him and how he fulfilled all of the promises of God given in former times. They wanted people to know that, as Jesus himself said, the Kingdom of God was among them, had drawn very near, and of course the way it had come was through Jesus himself. So their message was firmly centred on Jesus.

They talked on the day of Pentecost, and part of the importance of that day was that no one was left out. All of those gathered in the city heard in a way that they could understand – that was very like Jesus. Jesus had seldom spoken to those who were not Jews, or at least spoke Aramaic as he did, but he had always been keen to speak in ways that people understood. This was why he told parables, why he was as happy speaking in private homes as to large crowds on the hillsides. Everyone had to hear, and had to hear in such a way as they would understand and remember.

This is a real challenge for us in the Western church today, but in some ways no greater a challenge than it was for the first disciples. We live among people who by and large think that they know what Jesus was about, what he was for, what he said and did, but who still don't find him relevant to their lives. The first disciples went to people who thought that they had God all figured out. They knew what God wanted – it was all codified in the law – they thought they knew what God was about – he was about having them as his special people- they thought they knew what the promises in the Scriptures meant and had a good idea of how it would look when they were fulfilled.

There were a lot of preconceptions which the first disciples had to overcome, even as there are many, though different, preconceptions which we too have to overcome.

The first Christians tackled these preconceptions head on, very much as we see Jesus doing in John's gospel. John's is the most confrontational of the gospels, and the most challenging to read. The early Church tended to tell the Jewish people that they were wrong about their suppositions, and to tell them in words of one syllable. After Pentecost they were not afraid of confrontation, of contradicting people. They were not concerned to be liked, but to be faithful. We could learn something from them.

The next thing we see the disciples doing which is like Jesus, which bears witness to Jesus in action, is that they healed people. They did not heal lots of people. There are accounts in the gospels of Jesus healing huge crowds of sick who were brought to him. Acts does not show us this although there is one telling little vignette in Acts 5:15 where people bring hordes of sick into the streets so that Peter's shadow should fall on them as he passed by, and they were all cured. But the main story of healing in the early part of the story of the Church is that of the lame man at the beautiful gate of the temple, who is made to walk again by Peter and John. As in the stories of healing in John's gospel this proves to be a controversial act. It leads to much "conversation" most of it with the authorities. When Jesus healed a blind man the same thing happened. In some ways it is a mark of the authenticity of the disciples' witness that it leads to similar conclusions as Jesus' life and actions did.

Healing in the Western church these days tends to be a private matter. It does happen, absolutely it does, that prayers for healing are answered, sometimes in dramatic ways. But it is not usually a public act. The Church too has taken healing across the globe. Sometimes it has been miraculous healing, most often in places where no other form of help is available. Those of us who know Dr. Sarah Pickworth, currently serving in Afghanistan, will know that, although a doctor, she has in her service around the world, been witness to all kinds of miraculous healing in situations where no "proper" medical care was available, but the love and prayers of Christians were. But Christians have also taken healing around the world in that so often those who have gone with the gospel have also gone with an understanding of medical care and healing.

And locally, where we have good doctors and good medical care, the Church is still a place which provides healing – in prayer and in welcome. The healing that Jesus gave was not just of the body, but of the whole person, and as we welcome and love our neighbours and strangers, the healing that we give cannot be calculated – but you know yourself how you have experienced it.

The early disciples also provided for those in need. We think back to the stories of Jesus feeding the five thousand or the four thousand, and we know that provision for need was something Jesus modelled for us in his ministry. The early church did not feed five thousand once, but fed many, many people daily. They did not do it by miraculous, supernatural means, but by the perhaps greater miracle of people loving each other, and trusting each other so deeply that they held everything in common. The little story from Acts we read this morning was about how the Church leaders found that this provision of food for those who were in need became something so great that they had to make sure it was organised properly. In fact, on one level, this is the story of how a Christian movement became an organised church!

The story of Ananias and Sapphira shows us that the sharing we do for others should be honest and not done for show, but share we still should and provide for those who have nothing. This has been a hallmark of Christians bearing witness to the love of God down the centuries, often unheralded and unremarked. We do it often now through the work of organisations like Christian Aid, because fair sharing needs some organisation, as the early Christians discovered. But I know that it also happens in this village, at times of distress or difficulty when the sharing of a cake or a casserole is not so much because of physical need as emotional need, a gift of love.

But the disciples also bore witness to Jesus in the way that their ministry was received by those to whom they went, who they wanted to help, to whom they tried to reach out. There was opposition, almost from the first, for as the Jesus movement grew, entrenched power saw it as a threat. In the first chapters of Acts – and onwards too - we read repeatedly of imprisonments of martyrdoms. For these were also the acts of Jesus; part of his bearing witness to the love of God meant that when things became tough, difficult, he did not step aside, compromise, or turn back from his ministry. And that too is the calling to the church, that no matter the cost we continue to bear witness to Jesus.

In acting together, we do manage to do greater things that Christ did. Not greater individually, but because Jesus has gone to his Father he is not limited to one place, as he was in his human incarnation, and can work through his people as we work together all over the world. Our task is to put ourselves into his hands and to follow in his footsteps.

This morning we meet around the Lord's table, as we pass the bread and wine from hand to hand, as we remember Jesus' body and blood, his faithfulness and his sacrifice, his death and his resurrection, may we pray for the grace to be faithful witnesses to his ministry in the here and now. Amen.

--- 000 ---