

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

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## **IRRITANT AND INSPIRATION**

**7<sup>th</sup> Oct 2018**

Isaiah 61:1-4  
Luke 4:14-30

For all of this year, we have been beginning to tread a path of renewal in our church. Only beginning, because renewal is not a thing that ever ends. We are being renewed each and every day, by God's grace and love and our life together and our mission to our community and world should reflect this. But we have made a conscious beginning. In that beginning we have thought a lot about the stories of the Exodus, when the people of God walked forward into uncharted territory, trusting God to lead them and be with them. This is a formative story to keep in mind, because we too are going into uncharted territory. There has never been a church here in the 21<sup>st</sup> century before. There has never been a church for our community as it is today and as it is becoming before. For about a hundred years the church in Scotland as well as the Church of Scotland has tended to tread made paths, we have tended to walk in the ways that we have inherited.

This was not always the case. In the nineteenth century and before, the church was at the cutting edge of society, leading changes, leading improvements in the lives of the underprivileged, leading in education and health care and social care, and all in the name of the love of Christ. These were not paths that were there already, things that had been done before. The church made these paths by walking into the unknown, with conviction that this was what God would want, that this was where Jesus was walking. The church did it with passion, and not without a lot of argument and falling out, but still, it did it, and moved forward. But about a hundred years ago, the energy and attention of Christians was diverted from these radical ideas of changing society and being a force for God's love in the world. It was almost as if people thought that the church had achieved a perfection of effort, with no new places to go or things to learn, so that we settled into trying to maintain what was already done, rather than asking where we should now be going.

It is hard to change that mindset. But in fact that was the task that Jesus set himself in his ministry. Jesus came to a people who were also maintaining what they had. The Jews of his day were determined to maintain their religious tradition, developed over the years, against the erosion of conquest. Jesus came to tell them that this was not what serving God was about.

Jesus did this, ultimately, by making disciples to learn from him and follow in his ways. He knew that one person couldn't change a whole society's mind-set; it takes a whole movement. And so in the next couple of months we are going to learn more about being disciples of Jesus. Discipleship is more than just being a Christian. It is more than just agreeing with what Jesus said and did. In Jesus' own day he had people who were closer to him and those who were not so involved. We will see, as we study Luke's gospel, that he had a group of three (Peter, James and John) and one of twelve (disciples) and one of seventy two – we know less about them – and then he had the crowd, which were not disciples at all.

But first of all he had no one. He couldn't have any disciples until people saw what he was about and could know if they wanted to follow him. So at the beginning of his ministry Jesus was about being a catalyst. When he comes on the public scene, he is about changing the status quo, and he does this by being both an irritant and an inspiration.

In the story we read today we see that he was both.

He comes, fresh from spending time with God in the wilderness – that is very important – and returns to Nazareth, where he grew up. He goes to the synagogue. Jesus went to where his world was at its most static and traditional. People went to synagogue and expected the service to follow a certain pattern, to instruct them in its content but to reassure them in both the instruction and the format that was followed, which never varied. When you went to synagogue, you knew what was coming. What does that remind you of? Jesus goes along with that pattern. But when he is asked to read from the scroll of Isaiah, he does not give the usual commentary on the passage, a commentary which might look to the past, or which might re-affirm the specialness of the people as God's chosen in the oppressive present.

No, Jesus first of all says that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. Fulfilled. It wasn't now a hope for the future and it couldn't be just about the past because here in the present Jesus said it was fulfilled. It had come into its own. Goodness knows what the people thought he meant, but we are told that they spoke well of him. They spoke well of him and at the same time remembered – and reminded him of – his parentage “Is this not Joseph's son?”

And that is when things got interesting. That was when Jesus decided to shake things up. They were reminding themselves of where Jesus stood in their settled view of the world. He was a local lad, he was Joseph's son, they “knew his father.” And Jesus decides that he has to take on this attitude. And so he says that no doubt they are expecting him to do here in Nazareth what he did in Capernaum. This is interesting, because Luke hasn't shown us the Jesus has yet done anything in Capernaum, but he must have. Capernaum, as we will discover, was where Jesus was based by this time. He has left his parental home and established himself in the neighbouring town. And there he must have got a bit of a local reputation.

However here he is not going to put himself on display. He hasn't really been challenged by the people of Nazareth, except by their complacent attitude. And so he refers them to well-known stories of things that happened in the days of Elijah and Elisha, acclaimed prophets. There are lots of stories about both these men, but the two which Jesus selects to mention are about when they were sent in God's name to help people who were foreigners; a Sidonian widow and a Syrian commander. The meaning is clear. He isn't going to be able to do for them what they hope, because they think that they have him pegged. He isn't going to be able to be the person they expect, because they think he belongs to them, but he knows that he belongs to God. And he isn't going to affirm their complacent certainty of being God's chosen, because God is opening up his love to all people.

First he was inspiration – today this scripture is fulfilled – but soon he becomes an irritant to the people who think they know who he is and who he should be and how things should be done. And they try to get rid of him.

Is this the way to make disciples? To be an irritant? Maybe not. But it was the way that Jesus began, because he had to show that he was not for the status quo, which

had become entangled with national politics and identity. He had to tell people who thought that they had him pegged that he wasn't going to conform to what had been always done up until now. It wasn't that he was going to make changes just for the sake of being different. But it was that Jesus *was* different, and he wasn't going to allow that difference to be pressed down and smoothed out by the weight of expectation.

And that too is a call to us. The eternal Gospel message is the same from one generation to the next: the message of God's love and justice, of God's grace and compassion, and all brought together and given to us in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. That message, that truth stands forever and never changes. But everything else is mutable. Everything else needs to be able to change so that this message can be brought to people with new words, and in new ways. There always have to be new ways, new paths, made only by people putting one foot in front of the other and walking into the unknown, because the old ways, made by the feet of many generations, end up not starting from where people are.

If there is one thing we need to learn from Jesus in the first stages of his ministry, it is surely that we should not fear to be different, and to stir up reaction. Indeed, without reaction, how can we get people's interest and attention? Church should not be the place where the norms of society are enacted, or where nothing strange ever happens. When the church meets together, we meet in the presence of the Spirit of God, so how did it come to be that people expect church to be samey and sometimes a bit boring? In the next few weeks we will see Jesus continuing to both inspire and irritate in various encounters with people, and we who seek to be his disciples need to hear the challenge of these reactions.

Jesus never said, "Don't rock the boat!" He never said, "I don't want to offend anyone." His care for people was far greater than that. Jesus cared enough to challenge people. He cared enough to be radical in his love for them. He cared enough to speak the truth, not what was expected, speaking forgiveness when people expected condemnation, and condemnation when people expected approval. As we try to make the path by walking behind him, we listen to what he is saying to us. And one thing he is saying is "It's not what you expect!" Amen.

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