

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

IT'S THE MISSION

25th June 2018

Numbers 9:15-23

Mark 1:16-39

When you go on holiday, do you ever attend another church? If you do, do you look for one that is going to feel as familiar as possible, or do you like to try a different kind of worship experience? It's amazing how very different worship services can be, and yet still be Christian worship. You could go to an Anglican service, with written prayers and pages to follow in the book, and even within that tradition there are the congregations which do more and those which do less in the way of ritual. You could, depending on where you are, go to an Orthodox service, and watch the mysterious, priestly chanting, while you stand within the congregation, and around you people come and go, wander over to this icon or that one. You could go to a more Pentecostal type church with dancing and singing and hands in the air, and an "Amen, Preach it!" type sermon. You could join with the Quakers and sit in silence. So many different ways of worship, and so many variations even within each tradition.

So many ways that we experience church.

When ministers and others who lead worship are being trained, one of the things which we are asked to consider is what the experience of the congregation will be. Not how experienced they are, but how will they experience this worship event that we are planning and leading. Will they feel comfortable, and do we want them to? (Sometimes you want to take people out of their comfort zone to make a point.) Will they feel excited or tranquil, challenged or reassured – and does the experience go with the message? Yes, it's not so simple as just pulling a bunch of hymns, readings, prayers and a talk together! (Worship team take note!) The worship leader should be thinking about the congregation's feelings throughout.

Or so they say. And they have a point, but I am not sure that "they" are always right. I am not sure that this is what being the church is about – us having a good experience. I am not sure that Jesus was about giving good experiences to people in his ministry. Not that he gave bad ones, but just that this was not his focus. His focus was to proclaim and demonstrate the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth.

We read a lengthy excerpt from the beginning of Mark's gospel this morning, covering several stories that are often considered separately. We did that to show the bigger picture of what was going on. For the fishermen, what was important was that they were called. For the sick man in the synagogue, what was important was that he was made whole again, set free from the spirit that bound him, the affliction that limited his life. For Peter's family what was important was that the mother-in-law was healed and for each of those who came around in the evening – after the Sabbath was over – their own story of need and relief was the story that mattered most.

But for Jesus, although all these people mattered, although he met them as individuals, and cared for them in ways specific to their needs, what really mattered was the proclamation and demonstration of the kingdom of God coming into their midst. He was always quite clear that the mission, the purpose for which he came, would always be more important than anything or anyone else.

He got up to pray, and in doing this he would be reminded of his purpose and mission. Maybe, being human, he got up to pray to God feeling pleased with all that he had been able to accomplish the previous day. And in his prayer, he remembered that while this was all good, all part of God's work, it was only part. The mission was greater than the town of Capernaum. And so, when his disciples came to look for him, their first lesson as followers was that he wouldn't do what they expected, or what the people expected, and wanted. There was something bigger going on here.

None of the people who have been helped by him, none of the groups who have had a great experience with him is going to get to hold him back and make him become their personal need-meet-er. The mission is bigger than anyone's individual experience, and while it is great when someone has a good experience of God, in worship or in any other area of their lives, following Jesus, being a Christian, is about more than that. For the Christian, the disciple, the church, the mission that we are called to be a part of will always, or should always be the most important thing, more important than our own comfort or personal needs.

Worshipping God means worshipping with our whole lives, it means giving our whole lives over to God's leading and direction, and to allowing God's priorities to become ours. That was why we read that other passage from Numbers about the exploits of the cloud of God's presence. The point which the writer wants very much to make, and so makes more than once, is that the Israelites, in their wilderness wanderings, only moved or stayed at God's command. Sometimes they would move on day after day, and sometimes they would remain in their place for more than a month, but the point is that God, not they, determined when and where they should go, and they followed God's lead. They followed whether it was convenient to them or not.

Being Church is not just about the Sunday service. Of course, I hope that you will have a good experience on a Sunday morning, a good experience of church and of God. But a "good experience" is a subjective thing, which differs from person to person, and I can't tailor make the service for each person who will be coming – although I do try not to tailor-make it for myself! What we do here, now, is service that we give God. Spending an hour or so once a week not doing anything else, so that we can try to worship and to listen to God, so that we can place our lives in his hands is a service we give to God.

But it is not the mission of the church, and we shouldn't allow our understanding of church to be so small that when we think of church we think only of the building or the Sunday service. The mission of the church is, just as it was for Jesus, to take the kingdom of God into the world in word and in action, and this must be our real priority. It is very easy to be halted in that mission, to allow our individual stories and needs to trump the mission – the need for security, for familiarity; the need to be heard, to be influential; the desire to be comfortable; all of these can be like the people of Capernaum, coming to Jesus and inadvertently trying to hold back his mission.

God is calling us forward. We are to move on at his direction. There are times in the church when we are asked to stay still for a while, to consolidate what we have been doing, even to rest for a while, but there are other times when we are called to move on, and for us just now, we are in such a time. It seems to me, and to many others, that the whole Church of Scotland is being told that it is time to move onwards just now. It is not time to cling to the past, either to replicate it or to look back with nostalgia. It is time to look forward and to remember the mission that we have been called to be a part of.

For thought there has been a church in this place for almost as long as there has been a place here – almost as long as Laggan/Newtonmore has been a human settlement – there are many who do not know that God's kingdom has broken into the world and into their lives. Jesus had to move from town to town to further the mission, but although we are called to think about geography, we are also called to take God's kingdom deeply into the place where we are.

There are those around us who are plagued by demons – the demons of loneliness, or worry or despair, or – well, you know that list could grow to be quite long. You might not think that you have the power to cast out demons, but in fact we all do. We can all be the person who shines light into these different darkneses, just by our listening and caring and being there. It is a lesson I learn again and again when I am surprised by how fervently people thank me for visiting – often when I wonder just what good I am doing by being there.

There are those around us who are like the sick and maimed of Capernaum and need healing – healing of their lives as well as of their persons. We who have the word of God's love and the experience of God's love have a lot to give in terms of healing. We are not all doctors or health professionals and we shouldn't try to take on that role, but we know ourselves, and science is now beginning to remember, that there is great healing in friendship and love and laughter, and that Christians who are mindful of our mission should be those who spread just that.

Following Jesus means that our own priorities, our own wants and comforts, take a back seat. Following Jesus means that, like him, we need to keep our minds focussed on his mission which we have been called to join. Following Jesus means learning from him, learning the importance of prayer in maintaining our focus, learning that the joys and triumphs of yesterday are only part of the story, but today and tomorrow are written on a fresh new page. Amen.

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