

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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BE A BLESSING

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Genesis 12:1-9

Luke 20:9-19

These weeks leading up to Easter we are thinking about the question "Why is there a church here?" And of course there is more than one answer to that question.

We could spend time thinking about the history of the church. If we do that, then we have to begin, not here, but in New Testament times, when, through the missionary journeys of the apostles and Paul the news about God's love in Jesus was taken to various parts of the known world; to the Mediterranean countries, to north Africa, to India, to the southern parts of what we now call Russia and so on. And then, with the help of the Roman forces it reached the south of this island. And at about the same time, from the Celtic lands of France it reached Ireland, where it took root. And from Ireland it came to Scotland, with Columba in Iona and Kentigern in Strathclyde and Cuthbert in the Lothians. And from Cuthbert the Celtic way of ordering the faith came to the north of England, to Lindisfarne and from there to Durham.

And then, in 664 there was a great ecclesiastical synod held at Whitby, between the Celtic Church leaders and those of the Roman persuasion from the south, and it was decided that the whole British church would go with Rome. (That's a bit of a simplification, but in the end it was what happened.) It was after Whitby that the great sees were developed, and cathedrals were planned and built, including Iona and St. Andrews, Dunblane and St. Machar's in Aberdeen, and St. Mungo's and St. Giles. And from the cathedrals parish churches were maintained.

And so things went on until the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when the parishes became Presbyterian overnight, more or less, and the great Cathedrals became parish churches like the rest – those which didn't lose their roofs. Life went on, and worship went on and mission went on, and sometimes in a larger parish the church would install a preaching station, such as there was a Dalwhinnie. And at times there were movements to help establish the church more firmly in the wild lands of the north.

Laggan parish is one of the ancient parishes of Scotland and has had several churches and preaching stations within its bounds over the years. Historically it is here because there have been Christian people worshipping here for many centuries. Newtonmore is a more recent place, both as a village and as a parish. The village has been here for a couple of hundred years but for most of that time it sat within Kingussie parish. It was only in the 1930s that it became a parish in its own right. But the church, St. Bride's is here because in that two hundred years people have wanted, and it has seemed essential that they should have, a place to come together to worship God. There were, as most of you know, St. Columba's and St Andrews, the Free Church, and they came together and became St. Bride's.

Why is there a church here? Because during the age of Christendom it was deemed essential. The church was there to enforce the rules of society and to provide the consolations of religion. That is one reason. It is the reason which is still enshrined in the third article declaratory of the Church of Scotland, which, no doubt you carry close to your heart! No? Well, it is the one which talks of the Church of Scotland having a territorial ministry, meaning that there is no one and nowhere in Scotland which is not a part of some parish, and so the responsibility of some church.

But the era of Christendom is over and although its trappings remain, we no longer live in an age or in a place where there is the unthinking general expectation that people will be Christian, that this is what being Scottish means. The Christian faith is one to choose from several, and the most acceptable choice to make, when it comes to faith, is to claim to have no faith at all. We live, as we said last week, in a change of age. Christendom, which has served well, or adequately, under various previous changes of age, including the Reformation, seems to have served its turn, at least in the Western world.

So why is there a church here? If we are going to look for answers for our present day, we can't just look to history. History tells us a certain amount, but it doesn't tell us why we are here now. No, as Jeremiah reminded us last week, we need to look to the ancient paths for our answer. And you don't get much more ancient than the story of Abraham.

When God called Abraham, or Abram as he was known then, he was asked to move into unknown territory with God. Everything was to change for him, including, as it turned out, his name. He was to move out, leaving the familiar, not just for fun, and not aimlessly. God called him and God wanted to bless him, so that he and his family and the people who were to come from them would be a blessing. "I will bless you and make your name great *so that you will be a blessing...*and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

From the moment of the fall, from the moment that human disobedience marred God's perfect world, marred our perfect relationship with our creator, God decided that he would have people called by his own name, who he would bless, so that they could be a blessing to the world. Abraham and his family and the nation which came from them, the nation of Israel was first called to be that people of blessing. They were called to make the world better for those around them. And, quite simply, they failed. If you read their story in the Old Testament, there is very little about it where you can say that the existence of these people was good for the nations around. They were too busy being a nation, even trying to be a nation like those around them, to remember that their calling was to be different, and to be a blessing. It is a real temptation, one which the church constantly falls into as well, especially at institutional levels.

But when God sent Jesus, he was extending the invitation to be his people, his children, his family to those beyond the nation of Israel. Indeed when Jesus told the parable of the vineyard what enraged his hearers was that at the end of it the owner of the vineyard – which was a common metaphor for the nation of Israel – says that he will take it from his tenants and give it to others. If the idea of being God's people is not wholly withdrawn from the Jews – and in his letter to the Romans Paul hopes that they will retain this label and calling - certainly the invitation to be God's people no longer rests with the Jews alone. Jesus gives us reconciliation with God, so that we can be his children and can answer the call to take forward his kingdom in the

world. And at the heart of that call is the invitation to be blessed and to be a blessing.

If we are invited to be blessed, we only have to reflect for a minute to know that God keeps his side of that covenant. He does bless us. This does not mean that he allows only good to happen to us. We live in the world with our neighbours, and just as Jesus lived a fully human life, with ups and downs, with joys and sorrows, with weariness and the need for refreshment, so do we. The blessing of God comes in the context of our human lives. The twenty-year-old son of a friend of mine, whose mother is seriously ill, said recently "Life is unfair, but fairness comes with heaven." But whatever unfair load you may be carrying, you only have to pause a minute to know that God blesses you.

God gives us himself, in his Son, Jesus. God gives us his presence with us in life's vagaries. God gives us the peace of knowing ourselves forgiven, loved, chosen, cherished. And he does give us hope and a future to look forward to, no matter what. And that is quite apart from the daily blessings which we know in our own lives. Oh yes, we are blessed by God.

And being blessed, we are called to be a blessing. That is why we are here – part of the answer at least. We are here, not for comfort, not even for worship, but to be a blessing to our community. We are here to do good. We are here to make life better for others. Maybe we will begin taking our first tentative steps towards renewal if we hold up everything that we do, as church and as people who are part of God's family, to that lens. Does this or that action bless? Does it make things better, not just for we who are the church, but for those who are beyond the doors? Maybe that is how we should prioritise our church activities, or our own activities – does this help someone else? Is this something that brings God's blessing, God's love, God's goodness to someone else?

The very early Christian missionaries to our land had this idea at the back of their mind. They could see no higher blessing than to tell those who had never heard, the name of Jesus. And they were right. They were right for then and they were right for now as well. But the situations to which we are sent are not the same. They went to people who had never heard. We are sent to people who have heard something, who have heard a little, who think that they know more about our good news than they really do. I have heard it described as a people who have had enough of the gospel to inoculate them against full-blown faith. I do hope that is not right.

We are sent to be a blessing. And just like the early missionaries, we have to show God's love in action as much as speak it by word. And we have to learn to find our satisfaction, not only in getting people to come and join with us here on a Sunday, but in seeing people helped, seeing lives improved, seeing burdens lifted and problems sorted out, because God's people are being a blessing to those around them.

And when we are a blessing to others, we know more and more of God's blessing to us. Amen.