

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

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## **CROSS ROADS**

**4<sup>th</sup> February 2018**

Jeremiah 6:16-21  
Matthew 11:25-30

As we step out onto the Path of Renewal, between now and Easter, we are going to be asking ourselves one question, in various ways, and that question is "Why is there a church here?" We will come at it from various angles, over the weeks, but the reason that we ask it, is because it is in thinking about this that we will, I hope, be enabled to regain a sense of vision and purpose. Without vision, as Solomon said in his proverbs, the people perish. We are starting at the crossroads.

"Stand at the crossroads" said God to Jeremiah. Stand at the crossroads. That is such an evocative image. We all know about the crossroads feeling. We know it in our personal lives and we know it in our communal lives. Twice in the past four years we have stood at national crossroads and been asked our opinion on matters which were to decide which road the nation would walk down for the foreseeable future (although in both cases there is now some talk of going back to these crossroads and thinking again!). We get the crossroads feeling in our lives when we know that the decision that lies before us is one which will change things and from which there is no going back – decisions about marriage and family, about jobs and location and so on.

These crossroads moments come in every life. Of course, there are many other moments which come which turn out to be at least as significant as the choices we hesitate over, but which seem easier and less significant at the time. But we do all know the crossroads feeling. And we know it as a society as well. In some ways we may know it better in this period of history than at any other time for about the last five hundred years. We are standing at a societal crossroads now. There are all sorts of changes and choices which face us, which just a couple of decades ago would have been unthinkable. The whole of the twentieth century was a time of fast change, an age of change, but sociologists say that now we are not so much in an age of change as in a change of age.

A change of age. Like when things changed from the stone age to the Bronze age, and suddenly all the ways that people were used to live and the things and skills they valued were obsolete. A change of age, like the change from the mediaeval system to the renaissance, when again new skills mattered, when new tasks emerged, and various people lost power and influence while others gained it. A change of age, like the change from the agrarian to the industrial age, when many people left the way of life they had been born to and had to learn to cope with a very different way of life and of living. Living in an age of change can be both exciting and scary; living in a change of age even more so.

That needs to be said. People, most people, we people do not like the idea of change, especially change in the abstract. Specific changes we might embrace, but the vague promise or threat of change is not a happy thing for nearly everyone,

except those who really don't like what they have already. And when it comes to church life, if you really don't like what you have already, chances are that you wouldn't be here – after all you choose to come. One of the changes that has happened over the twentieth century is that the idea of church going has become a lot less normative, and far more optional. So, you choose to be here, and even if it is not perfect, it is good enough for you, or you wouldn't be here at all.

God's word regarding the crossroads is not given just to his faithful people, but to the whole nation. It is to them, to those who have opted to turn aside, who are about to make choices which will lead them farther from God, that he says, "Ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies, and walk in it." And these are words which can make our change-averse hearts swell with hope and glory. They seem to allow us to look back to the good old days, and to seek to recreate them again. They seem to give that permission.

But – you knew there would be a but – but, is that what they mean? What is meant by the ancient paths? What are our ancient paths? It doesn't mean the 1950s or 1960s, when our church was at its numerical largest. It doesn't mean the time in the 1920s when various strands of the divergent Church of Scotland came together, or even the time before 1848 when they broke apart. It doesn't mean the Reformation of 1560, when at a crossroads, John Knox set our church on a path of Presbyterianism. Jeremiah wasn't talking about any so-called good old days. He wasn't being nostalgic. When the Bible uses the word "ancient" it refers to things that are truly old, things that go back to the beginning of time, when God ordered the world. It refers to things eternal.

Look for the ancient paths, the paths which God has taken to show his love for his human creation. Look for the paths which God has taken to call us into his family, to name us his children. Look for the paths which lead us, not away from God, but back towards him. These are the ancient paths, these, not any way of ordering our churches, or any programmes designed to boost numbers. The ancient paths are the paths which God takes to come close to his creation. The ancient paths take God's people into the heart of God's love and the heart of God's will.

And when Jeremiah gave out that message the people, the nation at the crossroads said, "We will not walk in them." And very often this is the response that we feel that we are getting from our society as we try to show them what we know of God's love and grace and presence. And Jeremiah's people walked away on a path towards destruction, pulling the faithful among them, including Jeremiah, with them. And sometimes we fear that our society will walk away on a path towards destruction, towing us in their wake.

The church stands at the crossroads. *This* church stands at the crossroads. We are in a place where we have not been before, and what has answered in the past will not answer now. We look around at the people with whom we gather Sunday by Sunday and while we are so glad to be here, we know that in, say, ten years' time, things will look different, one way or another. No body of people ever stands still and if we try to do so, we will be like a person who stands in the edge of the sea and enjoys the feeling of the water lapping around their ankles. If that person foolishly and stubbornly insists on continuing to stand in the same place for a couple of hours, he or she will discover that although they have not moved, yet the sea is no longer lapping around their ankles. Either it will be over their head, or else they will have been left high and dry on the beach.

I don't think that this is a congregation which is particularly foolish or stubborn. I don't think that this is a congregation which says that our personal comfort is the most important reason we have for coming to this church. But we do find it hard to look around and discern what God is calling us to. Especially those of us who have been part of this church or churches like this for a long time have a hard time thinking about church in any different way. That's nothing to be ashamed of. It's not a shortcoming: it's only natural. And so, it is natural to think of church in terms of our own experience of it, in terms of sitting in the pews, in terms of singing the favourite hymns – and even some newer ones! And for those of us who are used to church like this, it is natural that we think of “church” as what we do on Sunday morning.

The temptation is to look backwards. The longer you live, the more backwards there is to remember! The longer a church lasts, the more history there is to remember and take pride in. And this is not bad. But we should also think of it as the more history there is to learn from. The temptation is to look backwards, to say “if only”, or, more practically, to ask what has attracted people to come in to the church in the past. But we are not in the past and when we look back, we do not look nearly far enough. We need to look to the truly ancient paths. We need to look to God's purposes for his people. We need to ask again and again “Why is there a church here?”

Of course there is one other aspect of seeking the ancient path, which the people either didn't seem to hear or discounted as unimportant. Jeremiah says that in seeking the ancient paths, we will find rest for our souls. Jeremiah's nation may not have cared for that, but nowadays there is a deep craving for rest, for peace of mind and heart. There is a boom in meditation, in pilgrimage, in mindfulness practices, in all kinds of ways of seeking peace of mind, or rest for the soul. Living in a change of age is exhausting, because one way or another it seems to involve a lot of running to keep up. Seek the ancient ways of God and find rest. It is part of the answer to why there is a church here.

And, of course, it wasn't just Jeremiah who promised that rest. Jesus promised it as well. He rejoiced that the following of his ancient way was a simple matter, not something reserved for those who were wise and learned. And he gave the simplest of invitations: *Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*

We are standing at the crossroads and working out which way ahead will be the path of renewal, for us as individuals and for us as a congregation. As we look around us, let us remember that the best paths are the ones which are so old that God himself has walked down them, coming to us in love and acceptance, offering us rest for our souls. Amen.

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