

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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STRUCTURE

14th January 2018

Matthew 16:13-20

Romans 12:1-8

This week I have been away in Edinburgh attending the annual gathering of the Church of Scotland's nominating committee, of which I am a new member. It is not a bad committee to be on, for a couple of reasons. One is that it meets just twice in the year, for a day in August and for two days in January; the other is that if you are on the nominating committee you cannot sit on any other of the church's many, many committees. Very many, as I found out this week. In fact, there are 26 for which we were seeking new members. Let me give you some of their names. Ministries, World Mission, Mission and Discipleship, Theological Forum, these might be the sort of thing you would expect. But there is also the Judicial Commission, the Appeals Committee, the Church Art and Architecture Committee, the Audit Committee, the Assembly Arrangements Committee, and many more. It's nice to think of all the committees I cannot be asked to sit on!

However, as I sat with the committee sorting out who wanted to be on which body and who would be good, at times I couldn't help wonder if this was what Jesus had in mind. I often think this when I am involved with the procedural side of the church's business. When Jesus said to Peter, 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church' did he ever think it would end up looking the way it does now? Probably not. That doesn't make it wrong, however. It's just that Jesus, who had a group of twelve disciples, used the word ekklesia to describe the group of his followers that was to come, ekklesia, which means gathering, an assembly of citizens, in Greek. Did he really envisage how large the ekklesia would become? Did he realise that when an assembly gets large, it has to have organisation? Could he have foreseen the diversification of Christian denominations, the hierarchies of some of the churches and the plethora of committees of others?

But, as any group gets bigger it does need more organisation. This is the truth that all who try to get back to basics discover, whether they are trying to get back to basics in the church or in other areas of life: in education, or in sport or in business. You can't go back, to freewheeling, unregulated days, unless you want to remain tiny.

This means that we can't do what you might call the New Testament thing all over again. We will never be the small groups of believers, meeting in houses, working out what it means to be disciples of Jesus. Although there are groups which meet in homes, they do not meet with the lack of background, or without the knowledge that there are other ways, well-established, of being church. We cannot go back, and nor should we want to, unless we think that the early Christians had it all worked out for all time, that their faith and organisation had a purity from which we have since fallen away. I can't say that I think this is the case.

There are those who think that understanding the Bible is simple, because they think that the Bible is prescriptive. By that I mean that the Bible prescribes our behaviour, tells us just how to think and what to do. To such people the early church must be the best and what we should seek to return to. But I see the Bible as descriptive: describing the behaviour of people in the past who have or have not been living sacrifices for God and by God's help, asking us to draw our own conclusions about what we should learn from them.

As I read the book of Acts and the epistles of Paul and others, which is where we find out about the early church, these are documents describing a growing and evolving church, making mistakes (Ananias and Saphira, anyone?) and learning from them. I see them discovering, the hard way, that not everyone who came to be part of them did it from motives of pure faith and love, but some were trying to get what they could, and others were seeking power. And so, the apostles had to counsel the new ekklesia to test the spirits of those who came to them and make sure that the Lordship of Jesus was at the centre of all that they said and did.

They were evolving, growing, discovering, and that was what made them alive. And it is as we too evolve and grow and discover who we are and what we are about that we too are a living body, a lively ekklesia.

This morning in the book of Romans, we read a list of some of the gifts that God gave to help the ekklesia grow. Paul mentions prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, giving, leadership and compassion. Was it ever meant as an exhaustive list? Are all these categories still relevant? The way that we have become used to organising our church, prophecy, which is speaking a word from God, teaching, and exhortation seem all to have become largely a function of leadership, running categories together which Paul makes distinct. That is one of the ways that the church has developed, as it has shaped and been shaped by the various generations and cultures it has travelled through.

And what about all the gifts and ministries that Paul didn't think of, couldn't because of the way his ekklesia was structured?

He couldn't think of anything to do with fabric.

He couldn't think of anything to do with technicalities.

Or music. Or children.....

Our structure has grown and changed, and should still do so, (should still do so, take note Church of Scotland, church of anywhere that clings too much to its past) as we think about what we are for. For although the forms of our ekklesia may change, our purpose does not. We are called to give over our bodies and our minds to God. Paul calls it offering our bodies as a living sacrifice. A sacrifice is a gift which costs you something, and in Paul's context usually meant something living that was to be put to death. Paul says that our bodies are not put to death, but that the life we live in them is now to be thought of as given away, given to the service of God.

This is another way of saying that what we do with our bodies matters. Because most human minds seem to be wired that way, we most often seek think that it means what we do with our bodies in terms of sexual practices and partners. And yes, that is part of it. But only a very small part. Everything we do with our bodies matters. When we wake and when we sleep, what we eat and how we exercise. How our bodies treat others, in greeting or in helping, everything we do matters, everything is a part of how we live for God. In my various reading this week, I came across the phrase "Ethics is worship." Ethics is worship. How we live is as much a

matter of worship to God as the time we spend in church on a Sunday or the time we spend alone with God during the week. If our bodies are not engaged in activity which glorifies God, which is pure and loving, which is looking outward, which is in line with what we say we believe, then the words we say or sing in worship or prayer are just so much noise.

St. Paul said it in another way, in another letter, when he said, "If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels but have not love, I am just a noisy gong, or a clashing cymbal."

And this life of ethical purity and service to God, this living sacrifice, is to be achieved by the renewing of our minds. We will not be able to live in sacrificial service if we don't think in the right way. You may not think that your mind needs much renewing, but if so, that would make you unusual. We absorb the viewpoint of the world around us, we can hardly help it. We absorb the way of thinking that puts self, or profit, or winning over everything. It gets into our minds so subtly, by what we watch or listen to or read. It really is important that we monitor, not only what our children are allowed to be exposed to, but what kinds of thought lie behind the things that run through our own minds as well.

Recently I have been struck by just one example of one aspect of this. As many of you know, our family was in the middle of a car crash at the end of last year, and so I have been busy with insurance agents. Which is all very good. Insurance is paid so that if there is an accident people are able to get things going again. In this case the insurance that has to pay out to us is that of the driver who was behind us. As I say, that is fine. But what I have found less fine is the way that my insurance agents have been very keen for me to claim compensation for medical matters, even though I have told them that we were not really hurt and have not incurred any expense in that regard. The people I have had to speak to on the phone seem to find it hard to understand that I don't really want to get all I can from this accident, just because I wouldn't have to pay. Their way of thinking, or maybe the way they are used to coming across is that you get as much as you can whenever you can. But that is not God's way.

If you want to have your mind renewed and kept fresh in God's ways, there is no shortcut to spending time in the Bible, and in prayer and in contemplation. There is no shortcut to spending time with those who also seek God's mind. The battle for your mind goes on all the time, and we should be aware of this. The answer is that life of living sacrifice, where you constantly seek to immerse yourself in God, where you give him your mind, and use it to think about and evaluate all that comes your way, in the light of God's love for us and our service to him. If we do that, then we may well find that the form of our ministry, of our church, will change, but only so that we can better serve God in carrying out his purposes. Amen.