

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Patchwork Patterns

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Sunday 22nd January 2012

Mark 1:29-39

James 2:14-26

My grandmother who was born in the reign of Queen Victoria, grew up with the skills given by an education in the early years of the twentieth century. One of these skills was needle-work. She could and did make clothes and she was a skilful embroiderer, but she also knew the art of patchwork. Patchwork certainly began as the poor woman's necessity, sewing what cloth could be gathered together to make anew item, often a bed-spread. But although it grew out of necessity and want, it became a whole skill and craft in itself. My Grandmother mainly practised the traditional hexagonal patching, where different colours of hexagonal cloth are sewn together, either at random, or in a pattern. However she was known to branch out into the more complicated "Cathedral window" designs, and to sometimes use other shapes. She also had books on the subject, and from them I learned that every form of patchwork has one thing in common: the pattern repeats. In the simple hexagonal form, the repeat of the pattern is in the shape of each piece - different in colour, all are hexagons. In more complicated designs the pieces may be of different size and shape, but the way that they are put together will ensure that if you look closely, you will find that the pattern formed by these piece repeats itself.

In what we read from Mark's gospel this morning, we can see the pattern of the Kingdom of God which Jesus came to bring in, and it is a pattern which Jesus expects to see us repeat to form a patchwork of beauty and usefulness for the world.

The pattern is seen in every part of the passage. We see Jesus leave the synagogue and go to Simon's home. His mother-in-law was ill with fever. This is not a life-threatening illness. This is probably not a long-standing condition. But it is unpleasant, and it means that her life is less than it could be, and this is at odds with the pattern of the kingdom. The pattern of the kingdom is that everyone should be able to live their lives fully and without impediment. That may sound like wishful thinking, but surely that is what we are aiming for when we give to the poor or the hungry or the sick. Surely it is for that end that we campaign for fairer taxation and better trade deals for the third world. Surely it is because we want to see people set free from the misery of illness that we pray for the sick, because we want to see people living fully that we reach out to those who are imprisoned by habit or fear. If you think about it, an awful lot of what we do as a church, as Christians is done because we know, instinctively if no other way, that the pattern of God's kingdom is that everyone should live their lives fully and without impediment.

So Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law, a specific named person, maybe someone whom Mark's first readers would have known or heard of. She gets up and serves him and his party, which might make feminist blood boil, but indicates that she is really better, and that she is grateful.

And then this part of the pattern is repeated, hexagon joining hexagon, as it were, when the whole city, all of Capernaum, gathers at the door with the sick and oppressed of the community, and all are healed. They

are healed, but they are not told why or how. The demons, the forces of evil know who Jesus is, and therefore how the healing is happening, but he will not allow them to speak. They have a saying in advertising, that there is no such thing as bad publicity, but for Jesus that is not true. There are sources of knowledge from which he will not accept acclamation.

James, who may have been Jesus' brother, reminds us that demons believe in God. They have fairly specialised knowledge about God, and knowing him, they tremble. But Jesus does not want mere acknowledgement, nor does he want to be a source of the kind of panic which the forces of evil might spread at his approach, with their fear of him and his divine power. The pattern of the kingdom is that the work done by faith is to enhance life, not to drive people crazy with fear. James agrees with this. He contrasts the trembling of the demons with the acts of charity which faith in Christ should engender in his disciples.

Anyone can say that they believe in God: the demons do, many people around us do, but if it doesn't affect their lives then there is little point in such faith. Indeed it can scarcely be called faith at all. Jesus' life showed the depth of his faith in God, showed what a driving force it was for him. The pattern of the kingdom should show this life-directing faith repeated in the lives of the disciples.

Which is just what we do not see happen next. Jesus' life of faith would be nowhere and nothing without his life of prayer, time spent with his heavenly Father. He has called disciples to follow after him, which suggests that we should see them up with him in the early morning, spending time in prayer. Instead of which we find them up, panicking, pursuing him rather than following after him, chasing wildly about until they find him, eager for him to do more of the same, to take up where he had left off the night before. "Everyone is looking for you," they say, and they are part of that everyone. They have yet to learn to be different from the crowds, to be the disciples who add to and repeat the pattern of God's kingdom.

Too often we are like that, disciples in name only, expecting Jesus to do again what he has done before, to fall in with our wishes, to act according to our timetable. It would make sense to Peter and his cronies that Jesus should make Capernaum his base, the focal point of his ministry, his kingdom of God movement. Galilee was always ripe for revolution in those days, it was far enough from Jerusalem to be slightly on the wild and lawless side. For a rebel movement, Capernaum might be a good base. But Jesus has been in prayer. This keeps him focussed on God's wisdom and plans. He knows that he is not just another rebel leader, and he is not just another national leader.

The famous Maccabean revolt began in the hills of Galilee, and it was for another such leader that people were looking. No, said Jesus, he wasn't going to hang around one town, to make it a place of importance to which the disaffected might flock. He was going on to the next place., It was just as important, and all its people were deserving of seeing and hearing the good news. If he had stayed still, only those who for reasons of their own were prepared to make the effort to find him would seek him out. By moving on he showed that he thought that all the people were worth him making an effort on their behalf.

And that is the patchwork pattern of the kingdom: to move on, to go where the people are, not to expect them to come to us. In the service of that idea disciples have for centuries erected buildings where they can meet to learn, to worship, to absorb the pattern which we must repeat. Confusingly, the buildings have been called churches, which is really the name of the community of disciples. Confusingly, when we talk of people coming to church, more often than not nowadays we think this means people coming to a building. But the pattern of God's kingdom had nothing to do with attendance in a building. It had

everything to do with going as a community to where the people are and showing and telling the good news. There is nothing wrong in having buildings to help forward our ministry and mission, if they do that. But when the building becomes a weigh and a burden, a distraction from what we are called to do, rather than something that helps us do it, then something is wrong.

There is nothing wrong and a lot that is right in having orderly services of worship and learning, with good music and beautiful things to look at and inspire us. But if that becomes more important than getting out to where the people are, if the only outreach we do is to invite people to come where we already are, then we are not doing what Jesus did. He refused to stay still and let those who would come. He went actively into the community to show to everyone that they were important and valued by him and by God.

There is a pattern in the kingdom of God, and what is genuinely of the kingdom will repeat that pattern, either obviously, as one hexagon is sewn to another, or in ways that only declare themselves when they are looked at closely and long, as in some of the more complicated patchwork designs. But wherever the kingdom of God is we will find people valued, their lives enhanced, and disciples prepared to do the work and put themselves out so that others may know and discover God's kingdom for themselves.

Amen