

John 2:1-4, 7:1-31

Today we're continuing our journey through the Gospel of John. We're looking at two passages – one from the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the other from its end. Very often John's Gospel is a response to what is happening in John's community 60 years after Jesus died on the cross. We see there is a lot of division – last week we touched on the division over Jesus' body and blood being consumed in the Lord's Supper, what that means and how literal that might be.

Today we get a glimpse of a community divided over who Jesus is and again it's probably the debate John's community was having well beyond the time of Jesus' earthly life span. 'The Jews', as John refers to them, are a group of opponents of the message of Jesus at the end of the first century. It seems this message divided the community and potentially led to violence too.

That's maybe partly a good thing. It shows that people take the claims about Jesus seriously, wrestle with them and feel passionate about them – one way or another. Conflict can be a good thing.

Last week I read a book entitled 'Death by meeting' by Patrick Lencioni. I read it as someone I am friendly with knows I'm not a great fan of meetings. I find them dreary, stressful and pointless. Not all of them of course but by and large I'd rather not go to meetings at all. Which is a pain as much of my life is made up of meetings of various groups.

What Lencioni is saying, is that we simply need to make our meetings more interesting. He concludes that the way forward is to introduce conflict and drama into them. Get people hooked on the topic, tease out all the points of view before agreeing on a way forward. Everybody should feel they've been given an opportunity to make their case which means that once the decision is taken (regardless of whether in their favour or not), people will collectively own it. What Lencioni is advocating is constructive conflict that invites engagement and debate.

Some of that is coming shortly at the Presbytery level but before I speak about it, I'd like to point out another lesson from today's readings. The one about time. Let me quote David Lose in his commentary entitled 'Learning to Tell Time': 'Timing is everything, and not just in this scene but across John's Gospel. In fact, there are two kinds of time that animate John's imagination. One is the kind of time with which we count and track the everyday events of our lives. It is the time that is measured in minutes and seconds, hours and days. It is the time we spend standing in lines, or clocking in at work, or waiting at the stoplight. It is mundane, ordinary time and it beats on relentlessly until that time when we close our eyes and escape its dull, predictable cadence.

But there is another kind of time at play, as well, a royal kind of time, where all that is predictable fades and what emerges in its place is sheer possibility. This is God's time, and it punctures through the ordinary canvas and clock of our lives at unexpected

intervals to reveal a glimpse of the divine. So when Jesus speaks of his “hour” he isn’t speaking of a time and date on his calendar, he’s talking about the time when God will reveal his glory through his cross, resurrection, and ascension, the time when God will be accessible to all, once and for all.

That time, that hour, Jesus says, has not yet come.’¹

In our churches we know how to tell time. We meet every Sunday at 11.15 am, the Session meetings begin at 7.30 pm and we have them every two months. Presbytery meetings take place every couple of months too but on a Wednesday during the day. Quick light lunches are always on the first Wednesday of every month except for January and so on and so on. We mastered that chronological time.

But can we tell God’s time? Do we know how to tell where God is on the move and how we can be a part of that?

Collectively, as the Church of Scotland and beyond, we have been in a time of transition for decades. It took us a long time to discover that though. But now we see the declining membership, finances, less ministers being trained. Currently we’re short of about 300 ministers to fill every parish vacancy around Scotland – there are 1023 charges. In the next 4 years nearly half of the current ministers will retire and we’ll be down to 468 ministers to fill 1023 charges.

Locally, in the last 8 years, since I’ve arrived as a locum here, we’ve lost a quarter of our congregation through death – from 419 members we’re now down to 308.

In the Church we’re not only good with chronological time but we know our numbers too.

How about God’s time? Do we see God at work through what we can measure? Do we know what’s emerging?

At Monday’s Kirk Session meeting we had a debate over what the purpose of the church is – is it to fill the pews on a Sunday morning or is it to lead people to Jesus? I think it’s always been the latter but sometimes we mistake defending the status quo with God’s work. I think God is doing more than just trying to fill the pews in Kirkwall East Church.

At Presbytery level we’ve been good at measuring numbers too. We realised that for many years now it’s been virtually impossible to fill the island vacancies. We also realised that having 6 ministers for 11 charges made up of 21 congregations is probably as good as it will ever be. Therefore we began thinking about how we can respond to that realisation and do something constructive in the Presbytery to provide territorial ministry to every corner of Orkney. We’d like to do this before we’re forced to like the Presbytery

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1770>.

of Shetland were when all they could do is to sell the vast majority of their churches and unite into one congregation attached to the Presbytery of Aberdeen.

To this end we asked every congregation to self-assess their own needs, vision and future last year. At Kirkwall East we held an open meeting to which 5 individuals turned up. We had a productive time nevertheless and stated in our overview that 'We are an inward-looking congregation and we realise we need to get rid of our canoes the way the explorers Lewis and Clark had to adapt - while they had prepared to find a waterway to the Pacific Ocean, instead they found themselves in the Rocky Mountains. They had to abandon their canoes and keep on exploring the uncharted territory (see Tod Bolsinger's 'Canoeing the Mountains').'

The Presbytery is trying to leave the canoes behind and keep on exploring the new and unknown landscape. We're currently thinking of grouping all congregations in Orkney into hubs – either three, four or five across the Presbytery. The hubs would share the ministry teams with at least one minister in each supported by Readers, a Children & Families worker and central administrative support. These are not firm proposals but a beginning of a discussion to which we hope members of congregations, including yourselves, will contribute. We're holding a public conference style meeting here in this church on the 16th March to discuss where God is taking us as a Presbytery and how we can get alongside him. It's God's time, God's Church and God's mission we're about. You're invited to join us on this journey of discernment. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Redeemer, our Master. Amen.