

God's ongoing work

Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Matthew 9:35 – 10:8

A phrase going around at the moment, and with good reason, is, 'The building may be closed, but the Church is still open.' We have a banner to that effect on the railings outside the Church, something that the Presbytery has sponsored for all the churches in Edinburgh. It has certainly been true for our Church. Yes, we have not been able to meet and worship and share coffee and meals and fun and chat; yes the organisations and groups that are so essential to what we are not only as a parish church but as a community resource are not currently operating; but the Church is still open. God's ongoing work is still being done.

In our reading from Matthew's Gospel, we learn something about what that ongoing work was for Jesus and His first followers: healing and compassion right at the top of the list. However you want to take healing, physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, it is to be accompanied by compassion. That's certainly God's work. When Jesus sends out His Twelve friends, they too are given instruction: proclaim the good news, cure the sick, cast out demons, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons. And look out for the lost souls. That's certainly God's work too. Master and followers are engaged in the same work. When the work seems tough; when the numbers seem few; when the challenges seem daunting; God's work is ongoing.

Hearing that list, you might be left wondering if anyone apart from Jesus is up to the job. Cure the sick? Cleanse the lepers? Maybe. Raise the dead? Cast out demons? That might come in handy around Morningside!

Few would have felt up to those assignments. When we juxtapose Jesus' accomplishments with the disciples' impending task, the followers of Jesus seem destined to fall short of His performance. What chance do we, followers of Jesus 2,000 years on, have?

The question is, for those first followers of Jesus, what chance did they have? None of them all that special, none of them particularly noted for their grasp of faith, none of them wealthy, none of them in a position of influence in society. But there they are: the Twelve. Churches and

Cathedrals are named now after all but one of them. They were called the disciples (in Greek it means learners), who then became the apostles, (in Greek the sent out ones). On their shoulders the future of the Church was placed. With their brains, and their mouths, the thinking and speaking about God's good news relied. God's ongoing work depended on them. The learners and the sent out ones. For the followers of Jesus, learning is done on the way; action and learning belong together. Nor, in this account of what God's ongoing work entails, was there any reporting back, because the work goes on; it evolves; it develops; it goes on. And there are tough things needing done. This is mission work, in a tough time, and it's not going to be easy.

It is what we will need to be continuing in our day. And it's no less easy today. In this time of pandemic, when the usual ways of doing what we do for God's ongoing work we are have to recalibrate our efforts and our operation. But it still matters: for us; for our families and communities; for the Church; and for God.

It still matters that the Church in our society today speaks out and maintains its public voice. Some get shifty when we speak on political matters, but why should we be silent at a time when the poor remain poor; the hungry remain hungry; the excluded remain excluded; the homeless still face an uncertain future, though it was stunning to see how quickly many of them were brought off the streets when COVID struck – where there is a political will, there is a way. Some get uneasy when the Church speaks out on matters of race and violence against black people, and prejudice against black people. I'm not sure that pulling down statues of historic figures involved in the slave trade or renaming streets is going to make the slightest bit of difference when the sins of two hundred years ago have simply mutated into the racism still evident in most of the western world today. In the United States, in Europe, and in the United Kingdom. Where a President postures outside churches holding a Bible upside down; where immigration laws are used to keep people who don't have enough money out of our country, only for us to find that these worthless people are actually priceless because they work in our NHS, the pick our crops, they support our hospitality industry, and they do countless other things that we don't want to do, God's ongoing work is still needing done. Do you think Jesus would have remained silent? Do you think Jesus

would have looked away, embarrassed, pained, and wring His pierced hands in impotent despair? This is part of God's ongoing work for the learning ones, and the sent out ones.

Our world needs us right now. Not because we're perfect and flawless, but because we need to embody compassion, and we need to be involved in all kinds of healing, and we need to cure all sorts of illnesses, and we need to cast out many different demons, and we need to raise all manner of lost hopes and broken hopes. Because that's what followers of Jesus, then and now, do.

And that is what we are doing, in different ways. We've kept worship going, in a way a few weeks ago we wouldn't have imagined possible. We've phoned and we've e-mailed and we've zoomed, to show that we still care and remember. We have shopped and picked up prescriptions that have brought nourishment and healing. We've wrestled with copyright law and licensing, and Church finance and property, and supporting a food bank and other charities too countless to mention. We've begun to think about what we might be able to do as we emerge, tentatively, from lockdown. And there has been so much more. I want to say thank you to all of you who have said something or done something in these unimaginably difficult times.

Thank you!

Every word we say motivated by our faith impels us to do something, whether or not we see the ultimate effect it has or not, has an impact. We are constantly communicating and embodying God's love. Who and what we are preaches. What we do focusses us on grace and focusses us on love and focusses us on serving others.

Despite the isolation and the shielding, God's ongoing work has been done. Despite the lockdown and the frustration, God's ongoing work has been done. Despite the weariness and the fearfulness, God's ongoing work has been done. And when these awful days are passed, and pass they will, and we have learned new ways, and begun to shape a new future for our Church, God's ongoing work will be done.

Desmond Tutu once told this story:

“There is a Church in Rome with a statue of Christ without arms. When you ask why, you are told that it shows how God relies on us, His human partners, to do his work for Him. Without us, God has no eyes; without us, God has no ears; without us, God has no arms. God waits upon us and relies on us.”

God’s ongoing work: past, present, future, for all God’s disciples, the learning ones, and all God’s apostles, the sent ones.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen