

Generous

Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10

I attended a meeting last week with our Session Clerk and representatives of the churches we have been grouped with by the Presbytery as part of the now approved Presbytery Mission Plan. In many ways we will begin to think about how we will work together over the coming months. We will be building on relationships with Greenbank, Fairmilehead and a new one with St John's Colinton Mains Parish Churches. Each Church had prepared extensive documents about their church activities and diaries and it became very clear very early on that whilst there were areas of concern, by and large here are four active and outward looking churches, some similarities, some differences, but displaying a level of commitment and imagination that is not how churches are depicted.

I suspect in our church, like the others, we take so much of our activity for granted. The things that we see as routine and have been doing for a long time will be seen as ground-breaking by others. The Wednesday Club, for people with disability. The weekly coffee morning. The Morningside Hope project for people with dementia and their carers. The frequently staggering support our church gives in money and in practical gifts in kind to the Edinburgh Clothing Store and the South East Edinburgh Foodbank.

Life is not perfect, but there are times when, not seeing how good many things are, we descend into the despairing and the critical. I had an old Nanny who, when taking me out for a walk on a bright, summer's day, would look up into the cloudless sky and radiant sun and say, as only a good Calvinist can, "Aye, but we'll pay for it..."

I'm not ungrateful to the moaning Minnies and the negative Normans who keep our feet on the ground and our viewpoints realistic. It is a legitimate question to ask about how will find younger people to come and share with us in the work of the church, or where will we be in ten years' time? But COME ON! We're not dead yet!

Luke, writing his sequel to his gospel, known as the Acts of the Apostles, tells the story how that first group of confused, excited, unreliable, sacrificially dedicated women and men began to gather together as the first Christian Church. From dozens to hundreds to thousands something happened, the Jesus-something, that sparked and connected with the people.

Religious life, then as now, can be plagued by momentary enthusiasm. Enthusiasm at its original root meaning is literally, 'filled with God'. But it can be a virtual synonym for a short-term high that does not take root in long-term commitment. Many of us are suspicious of religious emotion. Those that love Christmas melt away after Twelfth Night; those who are radiant at a wedding, or glowing at a baptism, drift away into the humdrum reality of relationships and family. All the other mountain-top experiences we have through music, or words, or the beauty of visual art, never quite last long enough and the world becomes grey, and cooler, and nondescript all too soon.

Reading about the early days of the first Christian Church, history teaches us that we have seen other revivals and outbursts of piety come and go. But Luke will not leave us there.

I don't think he wants us to be mesmerised by the sheer numbers of converts. Luke wants us to look at what they do, and what they are. For it is in their actions and in their being that we see what faith is truly about, in the communities of Christ wherever they are formed.

Those first Christians dedicated themselves to learning. Not, I suspect, sitting doucely and reverently, but questioning, arguing, wondering, wrestling with what it was they believed, and why they believed. For first century Christians, this was literally a life-and-death matter. Their faith was

soon outlawed by Jewish religious authorities and by the law of the Roman Empire. But something about the hope that Jesus represented, and the promise of His mercy and His presence and His love took hold of hearts and minds and souls. It didn't all make sense, but it did, nearly always, make a difference.

Those first Christians dedicated themselves to fellowship. I said at that meeting last week that one of the things I love about our church is the fact that this sanctuary sits parallel to the kitchen. We worship and we eat and drink, and in these things we are together. By design or accident, this is a glorious thing. We sit beside each other in sanctuary and in halls. In congregation and in company and community. How those first Christians would have loved our jam, baking and making stall, and after church coffee. And the coronation event next week, and all the other marks of hospitality for which we should be grateful and proud. This really matters. It is a sign of the living presence of Jesus in our Church, and we should never forget it.

Those first Christians dedicated themselves to a radical economic transformation. They shared what they had in those early days, even though this was not the final model for the early Church. Giving generously was an expression of Christian unity and love and remained, and remains, an important priority in the Church, and towards charities where real needs are met by real money from real people. Few of those first Christians were wealthy, but they gave of their means so that others were helped.

Those first Christians were dedicated to prayer, privately and publicly. When did you last pray outside of a church service? Is it something woven into your daily life, or only deployed in time of emergency? I wonder, is the nervousness many have about expressing their faith found in the reality that God seems a stranger to them? How are *you* with God?

In this story of what the first Christian Church was like, perhaps the description I love most of all is in v46. Those Christians had '*glad and generous hearts.*' What is Christianity if it is not glad? What is Christianity if it is not generous? What is Christianity if it has not touched our hearts and had an impact on how we use our hands and feet and minds? How glad and generous is your heart this morning? And just in case it is not quite there yet, how do you think you might tackle that, and change that; on your own, or with others, and with Jesus?

The future survival of the Church is bound up in a mixture of vision, accountability and decision making. A growing number of people across the Church see this, but there are still many who will bury their heads in the sand and hope for a return to a Golden Age that almost certainly did not exist for the Church.

If the transformation many hope, work and pray for within the Church of Scotland is to take place, and be sustained and continue to develop and grow, then the 'buy-in' of all involved will be crucial. After the crisis headlined by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, we have seen, uncomfortably, many shortcomings of our Church brought to light. The reality is that many of these shortcomings were not caused by the pandemic but existed all along. We have been living on borrowed time. What seems clear is that there is a time and a will to address some of the issues that we have long known existed.

Might we do it with glad and generous hearts?

We need to be clear that we will not resolve everything, but we could transform something, as we continue the process of becoming the Church for this time.

The questions raised, and the answers the Church needs to find, are not simply about transforming structures, but about refocussing on attitudes and priorities. These must have, near their heart, the commitment to imaginative and sustainable mission in every place where the Church exists

and has contact. Our story is not one of unrelenting gloom and attrition. Our mission in Christ's name to the world is based on what we have to offer, how we reach out, and how we care. There remains a humble greatness in our Church, not because of the glories of the past, but because of the glories of our Lord Jesus Christ and His message of faith to be lived out, hope to be given, and love to be put into practice. Good work, even in this time of crisis, has continued, but we do need to **CHEER UP** and seek today's possibilities. These will encourage us to focus, not on what we can no longer do, but rather on what we *can* do, *continue* to do, and the new things we will *learn to be able* to do.

And all of it, every last single bit of it, will depend on our glad and generous hearts; and hands, and feet and minds.

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

Amen