

The harvest is plentiful*Psalm 30; Luke 10:1-11*

A week or so ago I was sent a set of graphs depicting the membership traits of this and two neighbouring congregations over recent years. The figures in depressingly graphic form show a steady decline. Not that I wasn't aware of this but somehow seeing it in a picture format made the reality seem even worse. It's a reality facing not only the congregations in this area, but the Church of Scotland as a whole, and indeed all main-stream Christian denominations in the UK. Coupled with aging populations, and the increasing squeeze on resources, and the future looks grim.

For all major institutions, whether they be political parties, trades' unions, universities and colleges, sports clubs and charities, the story of today, exacerbated by COVID and lockdown, feels like one of unrelenting gloom.

To cheer myself up I went to a funeral last Thursday. The Revd Gordon McGillivray, who'd been Presbytery Clerk and the Depute Clerk of the General Assembly, was the 'Father of the Kirk', dying aged 102. A careful parish minister as well as a kind a loving husband, father, grandfather and great-grandfather, his very precise public appearance and demeanour might not often have been mistaken for a ray of sunshine. I suspect the same if equally true of me! Mr McGillivray was formidable in the way he carried out his official business. In the eulogy at the service, something he himself wrote was quoted.

'In recent years I have often been asked how I see the future of the Church and in particular, the Church of Scotland. There are a great many Jeremiahs these days forecasting a dire, and even catastrophic, future for the Church. This is certainly true in the case of the Church of Scotland. If present trends continue, we are told, in twenty years' time there will be no

Church of Scotland. Personally, I do not subscribe to these doom-laden predictions. As I see it, the history of the Church over the centuries has never been one of steady advance or of steady decline. It cannot accurately be depicted by a straight line either upwards or downwards, but rather by a line that rises and falls, rises and falls.

However discouraging the prospect may be at any one time, we must never despair. If we are ever irresponsibly optimistic, we deserve to be ridiculed; irresponsibly pessimistic, and we deserve to be despised. There is no need for us to be either. Of course, we have to be clear-eyed and realistic, but we are also men and women of faith, and so we must constantly believe that God can, and will, continue to supply His Church with the necessary breath of life.'

Be neither, "irresponsibly optimistic", nor "irresponsibly pessimistic...we must constantly believe that God can, and will, continue to supply His Church with the necessary breath of life." It was a lovely way to remember this devoted Church servant.

Psalm 30 is about realistic affirmation. No unrealistic pie-in-the-sky; no burying heads in sand and refusing to acknowledge how things truly are. But rather, "In this world, with its modern 'sickness-unto-death', true spirituality will be the restoration of the love of life - that is to say, *vitality*. The full and unreserved '**yes**' to life, and the full and unreserved love for the living are the first experiences of God's Spirit."ⁱ This old song in the Psalms, used at the rededication of the Jerusalem Temple after decades of ruin and devastation, is honest about what had been, and honest about what it hopes will still yet be: "*Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning...Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing; thou hast loosed my sackcloth and girded me with gladness...*"

When you are feeling down, beaten up by life, unfairly treated, overwhelmed by it all, irrepressible faith which is **also** realistic will say to you, 'come on, don't give up now, it will get better.'

We need to remind ourselves of that when we contemplate the future of the Church. I wonder if that was what was in Jesus' mind when He appointed seventy followers, (seventy!), alongside the

Twelve. Who were they? What was their training? There was nothing, nothing upon which to build. Just word of mouth. And there was so much needing to be done. A whole world to reach, and they were starting with backwater, unpromising, Roman-occupied Palestine.

To modern eyes their task seems presumptuous and unrealistic. Go out with no wallet, suitcase or change of clothes. Expect others to put you up. It's C1st Palestine, people treated strangers differently then. Hospitality was basic, but no-one was turned away if at all possible. How you treated others would be how you might hope to be treated yourself. In a more basic society, that's how things were. In our culture it's not unheard of but rare.

But let's not get caught up by the detail. The bigger picture is Jesus' recognition that there was a whole world out there, starting off in His own backyard, that was ripe to hear His message of healing and hope. Not all would accept it or understand it, but some would. *"The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest. Go your way..."*

With not much more preparation than that the Seventy were sent out, the number perhaps alluding to the ancient belief that there were seventy nations in the world. Luke's Gospel is the one that believes in reaching out with Jesus' message beyond the people of Israel. The plentiful harvest of the world, aching and stressed, worn down and worn out, fearful and hungry, depressed and isolated, waiting to hear of, experience and then engage with something better. Something of Jesus.

Some things to pay attention to in this story. First, Jesus promised that the harvest is abundant. He sees abundance where others might see scarcity. Perspective matters. The harvest is there, and there's work to be done. Same today. God's harvest is still there. Do we plan, organize, and work

in a way that anticipates, rather impedes and shuts down growth? Are we really praying for others to join us in gathering in this harvest God has prepared?

Secondly, there's a vulnerability implicit in the mission. There may be a harvest, but it was growing in a frequently hostile world. The Seventy are not armed for battle. They go carrying blessing and God's peace to homes that receive them and simply shake the dust from their feet of those who do not.

Thirdly, the success of the Seventy has far greater significance than they ever saw. They shared God's Kingdom and God's love, and because they did, we are here. In generations to come, because we do the same, others will have faith because of what we are doing. Believe that.

Fourthly, and most important of all, because they participate in Kingdom work, God blesses the Seventy. They are heralds *and* recipients of God's grace. As for them, so for us. There's no shame or false pride in understanding that what we do is God's work, today, and that is a sign of hope. Jesus' good news of reconciliation and hope depends on a network of people who see and believe what God is doing. Look at what we do, and Greenbank, and Fairmilehead. Of course it could be more, but it's not nothing, and we give thanks to God that we are still able to do something.

Too often Christians are shut up in buildings concerned about leaky roofs and heating bills and counting attendance and wringing hands because people do not seem to be worshipping God as they did in the past. Is it the case we worry too much about some things (which are not unimportant) forgetting that we, like the Seventy, have been sent out with the gospel of God's love and justice and mercy? How do we welcome in, as well as go out? How do we share the good news of what we are doing, not waiting for regional or national bodies to do it for us? We have a story to tell, and its one which will, because of our winsomeness and determination, encourage others in, from different generations, to address some of the gaps they see in their lives.

There is talk of the under-40s generation, dispirited by the way the world is, looking for something else, something more, something better. It may be different from what we might want, or how we might engage, but if our doors, and our hearts, and our opportunities, and our commitment, and our projects, and our work, remain open, and if we engage with these generations, and welcome them in, then who knows what harvest God might reap? Jesus empowered the Seventy, and us, to go out and speak and live love, healing, and hope, and point to a bigger purpose. That's still the harvest. Shall we think about ways to gather it in, for God?

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

Amen

ⁱ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, p97