

The welfare of the city

Jeremiah 29:1,4-7; Luke 17:11-19

Today we witnessed the ordination and admission of four 'ruling elders' on to the Kirk Session of Morningside Parish Church. Along with me, the 'teaching elder', the Kirk Session provides the vision and practical support that go hand in hand to help our congregation develop and serve our community, spiritually, socially and charitably. The elder provides a leadership role, and sometimes a pastoral role, and also a trustee role on behalf of our congregation. Elders are ordained, so no longer lay people. The position of elder is 465 years old being founded in 1560 at the time of the Scottish Reformation when each congregation had a governing body to see to its affairs, and the affairs of the local parish.

In the C16th Kirk Sessions met four times a week to deal with matters of ecclesiastical administration and moral discipline. They assisted the Minister at Communion, and in other matters of Sunday worship, as well as visiting members, and ensuring that people had access to education for becoming a Christian, as well as general education. There was to be church and a school in every parish.

The Kirk Session also investigated and made judicial decisions in cases of sexual offence, drunkenness, quarrelling, doctrinal error, domestic violence, and breaking the Sabbath. They'd find this out through their visiting parishioners and prowling about the town during the Sunday service to surprise sabbath-breakers in the act. Today all they'd need to do is pop down Marks and Spencer or Waitrose any time now! Or a golf course!

They could suspend people from taking communion for bad behaviour, which would mean exclusion from the life of the community. In worse cases they could pronounce excommunication

which meant your neighbours were forbidden to eat or drink, shelter or do business with you until you had repented, made amends and changed your ways.

Ah, how I miss the old days...!

But the elders on Kirk Session did much more. They arranged poor relief and education; regulated marriage, baptism and burial. They looked after church finance and supervised the physical maintenance of the church and graveyard; they oversaw instruction of those wanting to become church members; they declared fasts in times of trouble and feasts in time of rejoicing. They sought to provide arbitration and reconciliation between families, neighbours and citizens in conflict, and to ensure, along with civil authorities, that the peace was kept.

In other words, as the prophet Jeremiah said, they sought the welfare of the city. Not only its spiritual welfare, shaping what a Christian community ought to believe, but its physical and emotional welfare, shaping how a Christian community should behave. They tried to put into sustainable, daily practice what it meant to be a Christian, putting lived experience on what Jesus commanded:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

What constitutes the welfare of the city, this city, any city? Watching the exhausted trek of displaced Gazans on their way home, what welfare is there for them in that city? One man, a teacher, left his family in their refugee camp, and is walking home to build a tent on what is left of his house, with no money to buy food or to pay for repairs. It is estimated that 74% of buildings in Gaza have been partially or totally destroyed over the last two years. What welfare in that city for him, and for hundreds of thousands others?

What welfare in the cities to which those Israeli hostages held by Hamas will return? Where every loud noise, every shout, every creaking door in the dark, will trigger fear and terror and despair. What welfare in the city for them?

In Luke's Gospel we read about Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, entering a village where He was met by ten distanced lepers, calling for mercy. Jesus showed mercy to them in that village. Ten were healed, but only one, a Samaritan from a hated group to Jews, returned to say thank you. I often wonder what happened next, not only for the one grateful man, but the other nine. Did people really believe they had been healed. Did people mix easily with the former lepers, since leprosy was a potentially contagious disease? What welfare in the city did they find when they returned home?

Jeremiah in our Bible passage was writing to Jewish exiles in Babylon. They were far from home, and at the time of writing their prospects of return to their homeland and their home city would have appeared remote. Jeremiah told the exiles to build houses, plant gardens, get on with family life. More than that, they were to seek the welfare of the city where they were captive. Don't just love your family, friends, neighbours; but love your enemies. For in *their* welfare they would find their own welfare. Radical stuff, right there in the Old Testament.

We take this Bible idea, 'welfare of the city', and apply it to our lives today. What does that mean in 2025. If we seek the welfare of our city, what does it mean to be a good citizen?

The Labour Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood raised questions about what it means to be British in the multicultural, multilingual, multireligious collection of nations that is the UK. Beyond democracy and tolerance, what do good citizens do to promote and to live out 'community relations'? Health and social care. Education. Defence and security. An economy that benefits all and not just a few. Human Rights. Freedom of speech. Freedom of religion. Well yes, but these

are not just the domain of political parties. They are matters for society as a whole, and for Christians it is a matter for us.

More than that, we are not only citizens here on earth. Through faith, we have citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven. Our faith, weak, strong, middling, is given to us as a gift through which we seek by our prayers, by our words, and by our actions, to shape the kind of world, the kind of city, and the kind of church that God wants, and we need. In seeking the welfare of world, city, church, we find *our* welfare. The principles that shape our lives, the values that matter to us about decency, integrity, compassion and generosity, matter to God, and matter to all of the children of God in every city. As citizens of Edinburgh, how does our citizenship in heaven shape what we want and need for the people around us? Not only our attitude, but also our action. By putting into practice our Christian values and recognising that we are not the only good people around we begin to engage with the welfare of the city. Even if it's only enlightened self-interest there will be positive effects that will benefit everyone. Love your neighbours, love your enemies, love God, and that love will seep out into the streets around us. From buildings like this, and from people like those four elders ordained earlier this morning, and all those other elders of our Church. Those four elders sitting down here at the front.

Oh, hang on a minute. Where did they go? Probably trying hard not to go running and screaming out of the Church wondering, 'what have I done, what have I signed up for?'

What they did, along with the other elders who came forward to offer the right hand of friendship, was to melt back into the congregation. Elders may have specific roles to play, but they work alongside and within the wider Church gathered here this morning, and those watching online. Not on to the shoulders of a few, but on the shoulders of everyone, is the charge laid to seek the welfare of the city.

Rather than resisting or resenting or bemoaning the state of our city, or world, or Church today, God calls us all, young and old, male and female, saint and sinner, minister, elder and congregation member, to band together as a community of faith and to put what we believe, even half-believe, into a practice and a reality that will bless our city, and bless our church, and bless us too.

The motto of the City of Edinburgh is, *Nisi Dominus Frustra*. From Psalm 127: *"Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain."* We who share a Christian faith, or at least are sympathetic toward it, share with our fellow citizens the responsibility not only of seeking the welfare of our city, but of working towards it.

We do not work alone, for God wants this too. And all those around us should want this also.

Oh, and four new elders to help us along the way.

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

Amen

ⁱ Luke 10:27