

Year A, Proper 3, 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 9: 1-4

1 Cor 1: 10-18

Matthew 4: 12-23

Being Jesus's presence in the world

On the third Sunday of Epiphany three years ago, I preached to these texts. I talked about the importance of names in the Jewish tradition and asked you to consider a new middle name for yourself perhaps seeking inspiration from the fruit of the spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control.

I also quoted Rowan Williams, who said, "Church is what happens when people encounter the Risen Jesus and commit themselves to sustaining and deepening that encounter in their encounter with each other". I went on to point out that a church will only thrive when there is a true encounter with Jesus and critically with each other when the community gathers. In Acts chapter 9 we read; 'the church enjoyed a time of peace, it was strengthened, it grew in numbers'. This is as clear as it can be stated. A church community in right relationship with each other is a pre-requisite for growth.

Growth is three different but related factors: It is the depth of faith of its members, the power of its ministry in serving the whole community and of course, numerical growth.

Today's reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians emphasises the need for a faith community to be formed in perfect unity in mind and thought. Paul reminds that community that they are all followers of Christ, seeking to live a life of love, of seeking justice and supporting one another.

In that letter Paul gives thanks for the congregation's deepening faith and how they have been enriched and the testimony of Christ strengthened amongst them so that they were not lacking in any spiritual gift.

So, how do we measure our depth of faith? Do we allow the Holy Spirit to change us, both individually and as a community? How do we work on the power of our ministry? Do we allow the Holy Spirit to partner with us to change the world around us? If we try to do it alone, we will not succeed. Therefore, prayer, both listening prayer and intercessory prayer, are essential components.

When I was in Aberdeen and spoke to quite a few of what I shall politely call 'well-seasoned' priests, the wisdom they had distilled down about mission was to listen and discern well, try a number of things and you will then find out which one aligns with God's mission and where the Holy Spirit is moving. Several of them said in their experiences it was not always the most obvious things, it could well come from left-field, and our role was to spot when we had aligned our activities with God's mission and invest in it.

The COVID lockdown was not on the horizon when I preached on that 3rd Sunday of Epiphany three years ago. The lockdown has been the main reason for the dramatic reduction in attendance at this church on a Sunday, with families being the main loss. Children have grown up, quite a few in the families have started high school in those two years, and others have lost the habit of attending.

Each of us is called to contribute in whatever way we can to produce the conditions in which God is able to grow the church. In this last six months we have seen several initiatives to support our local community – Try Prying booklets being distributed at the monthly market, monthly Sunday afternoons with young people started in October, the first 'Dwelling Place' session in the Village Centre a few weeks ago and another coming on 31st January, and most recently an early evening inter-generational gathering here. In their own ways these initiatives accept that many, in fact sadly, most people, have little knowledge or experience of the Christian faith. It is a bit like someone talking all about Game of Thrones to someone like me who has never seen an episode. I don't understand that world, the characters, the plot, or how it ends. Today, we have to find ways to get people to be curious, to not have that interest snuffed out; for their thirst for spiritual meaning to be guided. And there is a

lot of spiritual thirst out there. Some people have some idea about Christianity, some know something about the Good Friday part of the story but not the Easter message. A bit like understanding the Game of Thrones, we need to help them start at series one, episode one in their journey, or through conversation, work out how far through the series they stopped or didn't understand the plot anymore.

I believe we do this by helping others see Christ's love through our own service and action, not theology or beliefs being expounded. I believe it is showing God's love for the world and for all of God's people, that will get many people wanting to continue their journey through the equivalent of a long-running streaming service show.

I understand the aim of leading a Christian life is to be a member of God's church – and by that I mean to play an active member of the community of people centred around Jesus, and being His presence in the world today. This will be seen by others as we live and witness to the values and the aspirations of God's kingdom as we have been shown them by Jesus. For we say every week, 'your kingdom come, your will be done'.

In our own unique ways we are called to model Christ's life. Like Christ, we are not here to condemn the world, but to show our love for all.

In December I shared a little about the impact that psalm 122 has had on me, and especially the last two verses:

⁸For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you."

⁹For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

Despite turning to and meditating on other psalms over the last 8 weeks, the Holy Spirit seems determined to lead me back to these verses, and especially when I have been praying about our faith community here at St Mungo's. I do feel, having tested this in prayer and spiritual direction, that these are words that I need to strongly commend to you, and for us all to use as the lens through which we see the world, and as a guide to our thoughts and actions in this coming year.

What ties the people who come here on a Sunday is our desire to follow the way of Jesus, to worship God, to be nourished for our week ahead, to love our neighbours as ourselves, and to help others come to know Jesus. A Neville has mentioned in his references to Brian McLaren's book about 21st century Christianityⁱ, as churches we need to be both vertical and horizontal Christians. I will say more about this in the coming months as I reflect on the book some more.

We must commend Jesus to others by imitating him, becoming disciples witnessing to the reality of our faith, loving our neighbours and growing to maturity as spiritual beings living in the kingdom of heaven, but doing that here, today, and tomorrow and for all of our tomorrows, on earth.

Our AGM at the end of this service, reports on the year to the end of September 2022. I have intentionally wanted this time to be about looking forward and commending and committing ourselves to God's service for the coming year, and I can think of no better way than by looking at you all and saying to you:

Peace be within you. I will seek your good.

I invite you to say this together, and for it to be an intention you set each day in your morning prayers. Can we say together, ***peace be within you. I will seek your good.***

Prayer

Loving God,
Shine the light of your gospel
In and through our lives each day;
Help us to live as a disciple of Christ,
An ambassador for peace,
And a sign of your loving presence in the world.

Amen.

ⁱ Brian McLaren's book, 'Do I Stay Christian? A Guide for the Doubters, the Disappointed and the Disillusioned'. Published by Hodder and Stoughton, 2022.