

**1<sup>st</sup> June, 2014.**

**Reading: Acts 1: 1 - 11**

**Sermon: Follow in Christ's Footsteps**

**Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?** That was the question which was put to the disciples by two men dressed in white after Jesus returned to his Father.

The implication is that they were looking in the wrong direction. So what were the alternatives? There aren't that many. They could have looked down. They could have looked out and around and they could have looked inwards.

Bearing in mind that the disciples had just been called to take the gospel message into all the world, the alternatives are worth considering because maybe that question is being put to us as a Church. Maybe as a Church, we have spent too long looking into the sky waiting for something to happen instead of looking down, out, around and inwards.

An American theologian who is quoted on the Church of Scotland website says that if the disciples had looked down, they might have seen Jesus' footsteps in the dust of the earth, and his footsteps might have reminded them that their focus needed to be on everything that Jesus had done and had said.

Rather than looking up and waiting for something to happen, the disciples were actually called to walk in His footsteps and to be His witnesses as they spread His message of hope and of life and of peace to the ends of the earth.

Following in Jesus' footsteps would clearly involve us in looking out and around about ourselves to see where the needs are in our world, in our world locally and nationally and internationally.

The American theologian asks us how often our faith journey is marked by looking upwards to the heavens, waiting for something to happen, or confused by change, or looking for a perfect world and perhaps yearning for how things used to be.

How often is our faith journey marked by those looking upwards to the heavens? The answer to that question will be found when we look within ourselves and consider what our response might be to the question: Why do you stand here looking up into the sky?

One of the best reports at the General Assembly this year was the one from the Ministries Council. For the last few years, each Presbytery has had to work out a Presbytery Plan.

In each Presbytery that involved deciding on how the people of that area could best be served with the financial constraints which were being placed on us as a Church. Each area was told how many ministers they could have and a committee had to decide how best to use those ministers, deacons and youth workers to serve their Presbytery. That meant unions and linkages in many instances but the report says that thanks to the Presbytery Plans, the Church of Scotland finally has a budget for ministry which is believed to be sustainable. In other words, we have enough money to fulfil the Presbytery Plans.

That's great news. But then came the bad news. The report went on to say that that sustainability, the fact we have enough money to support ministry, that has come at a time when our model of ministry is fast approaching unsustainability. In other words, we can't go on as we are for much longer. Let me explain. 80% of ministers are over the age of 50 and only two are under the age of thirty.

In the next eleven years, 530 of the 825 who were in post at the end of the year will have reached or surpassed the current retiral age.

The Ministries Council expects new trainees to continue coming forward but even at that, it is expected that, by 2025, there will be no more than 600 ministers to serve 1000 parishes which means that we will end up with 600 much larger parishes because we will not have enough ministers to cover all the Churches in the Presbytery Plans.

The Ministries Council is not suggesting, in the light of that, that we should abandon Parish Ministry but it is saying that we need to find new ways of fulfilling Parish Ministry, which means that change is on the way whether we like it or not.

We can rail against it or we can embrace it. If we embrace it, we will be in a position to find new ways of reaching out and meeting the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century world in which we live, a world which is very different from the one in which we were brought up and in which ministers in the past have ministered.

Is this a depressing outlook? Well, yes, it is if we continue to stand looking up into the heavens and wishing things were as we think they have always been or should be.

But it is not a depressing outlook if as a congregation we choose to move forward following in the footsteps of Jesus who constantly challenged tradition and said and did new things.

The Church of Scotland is looking towards providing a flourishing ministry. That's not to do with size, with age or with wealth. It is to do with life and fruitfulness, with life and usefulness.

The report comments on the fact that we are made in the image of God which means us sharing in the vulnerability and the fragility which God in Christ experienced among us. It led to his death on the cross but after a ministry which was to change the world.

That vulnerability and fragility is evident in the Church today but it is in sharing in that that we can change our corner of the world and enjoy a flourishing ministry.

When we are at our weakest, it is then that we realise how much we need each other and how much we need God, and it is at our weakest that we realise that we are not self-sufficient. Acknowledging our need of each other and of God is, as the report says, the goal of ministry.

In the report, it also says that the Ministries Council has presented papers about the future of ministry over a number of years now, and recently around the theme of 2020 Vision.

However, a vision which does not begin by facing reality ends up promising the world and delivering nothing. Our reality is that the familiar institutional patterns of Church in our part of the world are breaking down and disappearing. Church, as we know it, is breaking down and disappearing. This is not the same as saying that the Church is disappearing, but rather that our model of operating as the Church, as the people of God, is changing out of all recognition.

What we need to realise is that ways of working which are designed primarily to stem that tide are unlikely to succeed. In other words, if we keep striving to keep the status quo, we will fail.

What the report says is that we need to focus less on the survival of the Church and more on the Mission of God, which relates to, but is not limited to,

the activity of the Church. We can be Church in new and exciting ways but we will have to accept that change to see our Church flourish and to be a place of life and of usefulness.

If congregations expect their ministers to do what they have always done, then neither the minister, nor the congregation, nor the parish will flourish. The life will be sucked out of all of us and we will be no use to anyone.

That is one of the major problems which we face, the fact that the generations below ours see us serve no useful purpose but that is because of how we do things. We have ceased to relate to the world in which we live.

This is not about making the gospel message relevant to new generations. The gospel is relevant. That has not and will not change but it is about making the gospel accessible to new generations, using a language and an approach to which others can relate. It's about being Church in new ways.

One of the workshops which I attended on the Monday night of the General Assembly was called Fresh Expressions. Those who are using fresh ways of being the Church are making inroads into their communities. They have looked down and have seen the footsteps left by Jesus and have followed them into their communities.

I have to say that this is not about ministers finding new ways of being the Church on their own. It wasn't the priests who were standing looking into the sky. It was the disciples, of which I, like you, am one. This is about you and me together finding new ways of being the Church and of both you and me being willing to accept change, and more than that, to embrace change so that we will be a source of life and usefulness to those around us.

We need to look out and around us but we also need to look at our hearts and see for ourselves where our heart lies. **Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.** Is our heart tied to the institution which is ancient and immovable or is it open to the world around us, to the needs which are all too evident and to the people to whom Jesus sends us as we follow him into all the world?

We all know the phrase: who dares, wins. That perhaps needs to become our motto in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century so that the life that we know and enjoy as part of God's people is shared with others who are around us. We will only meet them if we dare to change and follow in Christ's footsteps. Who knows where those footsteps might lead us?

