

25th January, 2015 .

Readings: Jonah 3: 1 - 10

Mark 1: 14 - 20

Sermon: The Challenge of Evangelism

On Tuesday evening, a number of brave souls traipsed out in the snow to come to the Joint Board and Session Meeting. It had been called so that Tommy Bryson, minister in Tarbert and Team Leader, might explain to us the process involved in the Local Church Review.

It is basically what used to be called the Quinquennial, the five yearly visitation, by a team from Presbytery. It's purpose is to look at what we have done over the last ten years, what we had planned, what we've achieved, where we have failed perhaps, what we are doing at present, what we plan to do in the future, how we organise worship and outreach and so on.

It may seem like quite an undertaking and indeed it can be if we do it properly, but actually I felt quite invigorated, not because of the meeting, but at the prospect of injecting new life into our congregation as together we plan our future and look at our how we serve God and how we could perhaps do that better.

One of the sections asks us to look at Evangelism and it describes what evangelism is. It says 'evangelism is the calling of every Christian to be a witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is all the ways in which we share our Good News and bring others to the point of beginning their journey of faith.'

There are three questions posed thereafter. Firstly: How do you help people to become Christians? Secondly: In what ways do you communicate the Good News? Thirdly: Anything else you would like to tell us? Now, I'm not sure I can even answer the first two questions at the moment and so I doubt very much, at this stage, that I have something else to tell the team.

What is interesting, however, is what the questions assume. They assume that we are sharing the Good News of our faith and that we are helping people to become Christians because the questions ask us how we do those things, not if we do them.

I leave those questions with you to ponder in the coming week. How do you communicate the Good News and how do you help others to become Christians? Looking at the way the form is set out, you could think

that those questions were meant to be answered by me alone. However, what they ask is part of the calling of every Christian and not just the few who are ordained. They are also a part of the vows that we each make as we become members of the Church. Do you promise, depending on the grace of God, to confess Christ before others?

That was reinforced for me when I looked at the Scripture readings for this week. The first one was the second calling of Jonah to go to the people of Nineveh and tell them that their city would be overthrown because of their evil ways and their violence. He issued a warning to them which they headed. The people of Nineveh believed God. Even the king on hearing the warning put on sackcloth and issued a command to the people which resulted in them turning to God, praying for forgiveness and turning their lives around. Following on from the sermon a couple of weeks ago, we see order coming out of the chaos of their lives.

What's remarkable though is that Nineveh was not Jewish. It was Gentile and what we see is that God's mercy and compassion is boundless. The story of Jonah is a story but it's a story with a lesson that the people of Israel had to learn. God was not just their God. He was the God of the Gentile world as well and maybe we need to learn a similar lesson.

God is not just our God. The message to repent and to turn to God is not just for us. It is for the world in which we live. We cannot keep it to ourselves, as Jonah tried to do. How do we take that message to the people of this community?

Then we come to our second reading which was from Mark's Gospel and there we see the calling of the fishermen to become fishers of men. As Roderick Campbell points out, the call of the disciples has a very clear connection to the story of Jonah and his missionary exploits to Nineveh. Both in their different times and contexts, he says, reflect the urgency of making known the boundless love of God. The difference is that the disciples had the embodiment of the love of God as their teacher and friend but the call is the same.

The call is still the same, the call to us to go and make disciples, the call to us to become fishers of men, the call to us to call people to repent, to turn to God and to turn their lives around. Roderick Campbell was writing from his Church in Sri Lanka but despite that, he says, mission begins at home. It is two pairs of brothers who form the first outreach team.

It was at this point in the sermon that I got stuck. My first thought was:

'Where do I go from here?' and I didn't know the answer. Then I realised that I didn't know the answer because the question is not so much where do I go from here as where do we go from here and that one I struggled with as well.

How do we do outreach in this community? How do we share the good news that Jesus is risen and how do we get across to the people in this community that they are called by God to come to faith in Him, just as we are? The problem is, I don't know the answer.

An important step for me has always been to get to know people and the cafe. Messy Church and Bumps, Babies and Toddlers allows me to get to know people. It allows me to get to know different people but that is only the first step. As a Church we are more than a place for social gatherings. As a Church we are called to do more than that and that seems to be where we are failing and why we have so few new people coming to faith.

Now, I know there are a lot of other factors come in to play but if our focus was on outreach, maybe we would be looking more closely at what we are doing and how we are doing it.

We lost one family with three children because the hymns and the music are so dated. There may have been other reasons as well but that was certainly a contributory factor.

I know that when the hymns are slow and drag, it pulls me down and leaves me feeling uninspired. That doesn't mean that slow reflective hymns drag me down but when there is no life in the music, I feel flat and the singing is flat. Maybe that happens for a variety of reasons. This is not the fault of our organists because when Scottish music is played, the atmosphere is totally different.

However, maybe it has to do in part with the fact that we use an organ which is quite a heavy instrument. Maybe it has to do with the fact the hymns are mainly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and language and music has moved on. Maybe it has to do with the fact that we are all getting older and can't reach the high notes and so don't sing out as once we did.

Having said that, the more modern hymns are often similar in nature and can sometimes use music which is from the dim and distant past so more modern hymns are not necessarily the answer. However, there is apparently a lot of Christian music out there which is used by other

Christian communities and it has a bit of life about it but when we don't know that music, that presents us with another challenge.

Maybe it is just that we need new life injected into our worship but how do we do that? Maybe we need to see signs of growth to encourage us, not just growth in numbers but growth in terms of our own faith. I'm not saying there is no growth but because we talk so little about our faith to each other, we don't necessarily see that growth and so we don't get that encouragement.

If our focus was on outreach, we would need to look at how we do things. What the disciples did with Jesus was speak to groups of people? How do we bring groups of people together? Or do we need to go to where people gather and what do we say to them once we have a group? What is our approach to be?

Should we be making far more use of social media sites to reach people because in many ways, social media has taken over from the more traditional forms of communication?

But if we do use those social media sites, what is it we want to get across to people and how are we going to do that? We come back each time to the same questions but these are questions which we all need to consider and not just me as your minister and not just our elders. We all have a responsibility to make disciples. We are called to follow and to serve. Does that thought scare you witless? If it does, you are not the first to feel that way. The fishermen were ordinary folk and probably not all that well educated. If they could do it, there is no reason why, with God's help, we cannot do it as well. All it takes on our part is a willingness to explore the unknown and to try the unfamiliar and who knows what might happen if we become inspired and encouraged and enlivened.