

14th June, 2015.

Reading: Mark 4: 26 - 34

Sermon: Challenging Relevance

A couple of weeks ago I was at Presbytery which was held in Kilbrandon Church which is just before Cuan Ferry. It is a beautiful wee Church but with a lot happening and with a very active congregation.

As I was considering the sermon for today, I was prompted to go onto their Church website where I came across a phrase which caught my attention. It was in an essay written by Ken Ross, the minister of Netherlorn, of which Kilbrandon is a part. It was an essay which he wrote in 2014 following a few months study leave.

The phrase was 'challenging relevance'. That phrase was used in relation to the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel, Ken said, should be relevant to those who are hearing it preached. In other words, the gospel must be able to be related to the world in which we live.

But Ken went on to say that the gospel needs to be more than relevant. It also needs to challenge the world of the hearer. The gospel needs to challenge those of us who hear it preached. The question is how?

When I looked at the gospel reading for today, it spoke about seeds, but as you read the parable, and hear familiar words, you realise that in talking about seeds, Jesus was actually talking about the Kingdom of God which by no stretch of the imagination is an easy concept for us to understand.

To be understood, Jesus always spoke in parables and He always spoke about things which His listeners would understand from their own life experience.

He spoke about fishing. He spoke about seeds and farming. He spoke about water and wells. He spoke about losing things such as coins and sheep and even your son. He spoke about debt. He spoke about things to which the people of His day could relate and He always made what He was saying relevant to His listeners so that from the parable they would have a much greater understanding of whatever topic was under discussion.

That got me thinking. I wonder what parables Jesus would use today to make us realise that the gospel is relevant to us and to the people of our age.

In this area, in Mid-Argyll, Jesus could still talk about farming and fishing but maybe in addition to those, He would talk about the parable of the big bank balance. That would bring home the same message as the parable in which grain was stored up and rotted or the one in which the talents were not invested wisely. The message doesn't need to change but the way in which it is presented needs to be relevant to the listeners.

The parable of the big bank balance could be used to encourage us to store up riches in heaven, to encourage us to develop a relationship with God and Jesus as our Saviour rather than on pieces of paper with numbers written on them. It could be used to focus our thoughts on what ultimately really matters rather than us getting

caught up in the never ending cycle of work and worry about how much money we have.

Jesus might even tell a parable nowadays which is relevant to the digital age. He may tell a parable about Facebook and the hundreds of alleged friends which people claim to have. What might that parable be about? Would it not focus on the importance of genuine relationships and more specifically, the relationship we have with God, the God who is there for us and with us in person and not just as a few words on a screen.

We can already see that the present day parables, like the parables which Jesus told, would be not only relevant to the world in which we live but also challenging to us in whatever situation we find ourselves.

If we were to make the gospel not only relevant but challenging, what might those challenges be? In what areas of our lives, would we need to be challenged and would other people need to be challenged?

I've already mentioned a couple of areas in our lives which could be challenged. I mentioned the size of our bank balance and Facebook friends but there are many other areas of our lives which could be challenged.

We live in a world which is instant. We no longer need to wait for mail to arrive. We get emails within seconds of them being sent from the other side of the world.

We no longer need to wait to see someone. We can Skype them or FaceTime them and show them our world through the camera without them actually being in it.

Everything is instant. News is on our screens almost as soon as events happen. Nothing is left to our imaginations.

These things are not all bad. People get a lot of pleasure and comfort out of seeing friends and family on the other side of the world. As I said, the digital age is not all bad but it has the potential to run u into the ground because we are at its beckon call.

We live in a world where people rarely sit still or switch off from the world because there are constant emails, constant texts and phone calls. There is constant communication, constant pressure. Business men used to come off a plane from London and get a taxi to a meeting. Now they are on their iPhone from the second they touch down and it never stops. They get no break.

Equally, Facebook and Twitter and a whole lot of other social networking sites allow us to follow everyone's lives in the minutest detail. We know where they are going, where they have been, where they are, what they're eating, what their children and their dogs are doing and so the list goes on.

Our lives are open to the world and we can be got at wherever we are. I was in a cafe in Tenerife and logged on through their free wi-fi so that I could let Magda's daughter know when we were arriving home. Once back home, I discovered that the cafe had told the world that I was there. Excuse me but I don't want the world to know where I am on holiday and that my house is lying empty. Nothing is private.

We can be got at wherever we are, even in space. We watched a female astronaut the other day making food at the space station. Nowhere and nothing is private any more.

In what way does the gospel challenge those aspects of our lives and of our world? God says: **Be still and know that I am God.** We live in a world of constant pings. We are told in 1 Kings that God was not in the earthquake or the fire but in the still small voice. Can we hear God's still small voice above the pings of our digital world?

If we have no sense of God, maybe we need to stop doing and simply be. The challenge to us is to take time away from the busyness of life to meet with God. Even our iPads and our iPhones and our Computers need to be recharged when they are losing power and they need to be rebooted when they have downloaded updates. They need to assimilate what they have just taken on board before they can do any more work.

What does that tell us? We get to the point of overload because we forget to recharge and to switch off and reboot. The gospel is relevant but it is also challenging. It has challenging relevance.

We live in a world now where expectations are higher than ever they were before in terms of medicine because of the research which is being done and because of the success stories which we hear. We expect doctors to cure all ills. We expect them to be God and we often feel let down when, in our eyes, they fail.

We demand more and more from them to improve our quality of life and the amount of time we have here. Would Jesus not perhaps tell a parable nowadays which would encourage us to look within ourselves or at our lifestyles rather than expecting medics to do the impossible?

Would Jesus not challenge us to shift our focus so that we might realise that we have been given insights by the God who created us about what our bodies, minds and spirits need? Would we not be challenged to digest the information we have received about self-care and ways in which we can improve our lifestyles and help ourselves?

Would we not be challenged to look more to Jesus to see that He is the one who gives us life and who sustains life and who in the end takes us to Himself that we might enjoy eternal life? Would the gospel nowadays not encourage us to reflect on the phrase: Be still and know that I am God?

Does thinking about modern day parables leave you feeling that I am attempting to rewrite the gospel? I hope not. I hope not because Jesus always told stories which were relevant to His listeners and He would do the same today.

The Bible is a living Word but it's message never changes. The gospel is the same today as it was in Jesus' day but what we need to grasp is that God can speak to us through modern day parables which relate to our world. God can bring His message home through words that are

relevant to us, through words which relate to our present day world and through them challenge us.

Maybe therein lies the challenge for us. Maybe we need to find ways, not of making the gospel relevant because it is relevant to the lives of every one of us, but of presenting it to the world in which we live in such a way that we and others can see its relevance and hear its challenges.