

5th January, 2014

Sermon: A Call to Praise

Reading: John 1: 1 – 18

Ian Easton, a minister from Kirkcaldy, shared the following story on the Church of Scotland website and I thought I would share it with you today.

A minister from America was delighted to do an exchange with a minister from Scotland. He was delighted to find a traditional stone built church with a high pulpit which fitted in perfectly with his tartan coloured spectacle view of what a Scottish Church looked like. On the first Sunday the Church was packed with regulars and visitors wanting to hear him, and they were not disappointed. He had a loud, passionate voice, full of enthusiasm. They were enjoying listening to him, but from the minister's point of view things were not quite so enjoyable.

He came from a tradition where preaching was regularly interrupted by cries from the congregation of 'hallelujah', 'praise the Lord' and the like and so he was a bit unsettled at the lack response to his preaching.

After a few minutes of preaching he tried to rectify this by pausing and shouting 'Praise the Lord!' expecting at the very least a few 'Amens' or 'Halleluiahs' but the folk in the Church remained silent. He carried on preaching and then shouted again 'Praise the Lord!', this time banging his fist down on the lectern. Again, no response.

The sermon continued and then a third time he shouted 'Praise the Lord', banging his fist on the lectern so hard that dust rose but again no response.

As he was coming to his last point, he decided he would get a reaction come what may and so shouted 'PRAISE THE LORD!' while banging both fists hard upon the lectern.

Unfortunately, the lectern was not used to this treatment and snapped and fell to the ground. As this unbalanced the minister, he proceeded to lose his balance and fall over the edge of the pulpit but landed, safely, on the carpeted floor just behind the communion table in a heap of dust and splinters and clerical robes.

A wee man got up to help him, greeting him with the immortal words 'That is what you get for praising the Lord in this Church!'

Ian Easton told that story because he felt that this first Sunday in the new year was always a bit of a cold, miserable Sunday and so a Sunday when congregations and ministers alike needed a boost or a bit of encouragement and what better way to get that boost than by praising God.

To get to that point, we maybe need to be reminded that the baby of Christmas grew up. To get that boost, that encouragement, maybe we need to be reminded, not of Christmas and of the baby but of the reason that God came among us because that is what gives us cause to praise God.

Like the book of Genesis, John's gospel begins with the words 'in the beginning' but instead of focussing on creation which is the focus at the beginning of Genesis, John focuses on the Creator himself.

Through him, through the Word, all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

And the Creator came to that which was his own, he came into his world, and **to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.**

That message should really bowl us over. When we think of how excited people get when they see a pop group or go to a football match and their team scores, what is wrong with us?

I know I'm meant to be encouraging us all today but I mean look at our faces when we sing. Look at our faces when we praise God who is all around us and who came among us so that believing in him, we could become his children, children of God.

Is this just too big for us to grasp because I can't help thinking that if we could see God, we might actually praise him with joy and with thanksgiving and with such enthusiasm, and yet that enthusiasm is lacking or seems to be. Maybe it's just me that feels that way and I'm not criticising us or saying our faith or our worship isn't genuine. On the contrary, but there is some truth in the story I told at the beginning of the service.

We don't show any enthusiasm. We are very controlled when we praise God and maybe that is a Scottish thing. We're probably all more the kind of people who think of the glass as being half empty rather than half full but where God's concerned, the glass is running over and I wonder if we really, deep down, realise it.

That's why the focus this Sunday is on praising God because in the midst of gales and rain and floods and cold, miserable weather, when the summer still seems far off and the excitement of Christmas is behind us, we need a lift. We need to be filled with something to get us through the remaining dark days of winter, and what better 'something' than the gospel message, the message that God, the Creator, came to all that he created so that believing in him, we might be called his children.

Can we not get excited about that? We go and we see entertainers and we come back raving after shows. How many of us will rave about being in God's presence? How many of us will rave about the incredible news that God came among us and is among us never to leave us, never to abandon us, **the true light that gives light to everyone, the light that came into the darkness**, which the darkness, which no new craze, no new ideas can ever overcome. How many of us will rave about that?

The pop idols come and go but God is the same yesterday, today and forever and will be here long after every pop idol is forgotten.

If we could just mirror that enthusiasm in our worship. If we could just get the thrill of that message across, the miracle of that message across, it would have more power than any gale that can hit the west coast.

That is our mission. That is our calling at the beginning of this new year, to worship and praise God in such a way that people can't fail to notice that God is among us, the Creator in the midst of his creation.