

27th April, 2014.

Readings: John 20: 19 – 31

Acts: 2: 22 – 32

Sermon: Our Responsibility

My peace I give you. Those were Jesus' words as he commissioned his disciples to go out into the world with the message of forgiveness.

As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.

At the Annual Stated Meeting on Tuesday night at which there were nine people if I include myself, I gave out a challenge to the Church which basically began with the question, Where will we be, as a congregation, in ten or twenty years time? Someone later said to me, probably Achnabreac.

A cheery thought but in terms of our congregation, a sobering thought. However, I suppose in the light of that comment, the question is: what are we going to do with the time we have left?

I said in my short address that we had stopped giving reports of what had taken place in the past year because we all knew already through the Link and through the intimations and even through the Squeak.

Even in my address, I didn't look back at what had been. The main thing which had happened was the rededication of our hall but again we all know about that. I said that what we needed to do was look forward, hence my question about where we will be or where we hope to be, as the people of God, in ten or twenty years time.

We need to look to the future of our congregation if as a Church we hope to continue to provide a witness here in Lochgilphead.

The Church of Scotland as a whole is concerned, as it has been for a number of years, about the lack of ministers but we can't magic ministers out of thin air. The onus is no longer solely on ministers to take the message to the people, not that it ever was although it may have seemed that way and it may even have been expected. As a Church we believe in the priesthood of all believers. That means the responsibility for getting the message out into the community is as much your responsibility as mine. In some ways, there is a greater responsibility lies with you. I'm paid to preach. People expect me to say certain things, to believe certain things, to hold certain opinions and to have faith. The greater witness comes from those of you who are not paid to preach but who share the message simply because of your faith.

In the light of that, we have to find a way of getting the message of hope and life and forgiveness out into our community while we still have the freedom to do that.

I never thought I'd see the day when I would be saying that in our country but after the furore there was because David Cameron dared to say we were a Christian country, I'm no longer so sure. It's ok to say we are a secular society and to promote humanism but to bring God into the equation, well, that's a different story.

But then as a country we have brought that on ourselves. We have allowed our laws to be changed to accommodate other gods and other faiths despite the fact it says in our Bible: **You will have no other gods before me.** It didn't matter if Christians were offended as long as other faiths were not offended. Now, I'm not suggesting we go out of our way to offend others but we do need to stand up for what we believe.

Peter went out into the world and said to the Israelites, as we see in Acts 2, **you with the help of wicked men, put Jesus to death.....but God has raised this Jesus to life and we are all witnesses to this.** He didn't mince his words. He said it as it was. Jesus was dead but is now alive and we are saw him with our eyes.

Jesus said: **Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those that have not seen and yet have believed.**

That's the position that we're in. We know that God raised Jesus to life though faith but we are stuck in the upper room with the message. We keep it to ourselves. We don't seem to realise that it matters that this message of life, of hope and of forgiveness through Christ is critical.

If it didn't matter whether people heard the gospel or not, there would have been no need for Jesus to come in the first place. Why would you give your life for an unimportant message? Why would you give your life to open the way to eternal life if it wasn't necessary?

If that were the case, Jesus could have given a different message and he could have gone on and to live his life and die of old age instead of being crucified. He could have said, believe what you want. Do what you want. Live your life any way you like. It won't matter. But he didn't say that. He said: **Go and sin no more.** He said: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind and love your neighbour as you love yourself.**

Stop doubting and believe. He says that to us today just as he said it to Thomas so long ago.

When Jesus went back to show Thomas his hands and his side, he said to his disciples in the Upper Room: **Peace be with you** and he sent them out into the world. It wasn't just a greeting. It was a blessing. He gave them His blessing. He filled them with the Holy Spirit and He sent them out into the world.

Thinking about sharing the gospel got me thinking about our Bumps, Babies and Toddlers Group. At the BBTs sharing is a challenge. When a parent says that their child has to share a toy, there is a squealing match because toddlers want to keep things to themselves, and there is strong influence from that kind of thinking in Presbyterianism. We resist sharing the message.

Two things people never spoke about in the past were politics and religion, particularly in the west of Scotland and maybe even more so in the Highlands and Islands. Politics and religion were always thought to be very personal and private.

Jesus did not say: Keep the message to yourself. Don't tell anyone if you believe in me. It's private. On the contrary, He said the exact opposite. He said, **Go out into the world and make them my disciples.** He didn't say try and coax them but watch you don't say anything which offends. He said: Make them.

We should not be apologising for our message. Christ is risen. Christ is alive and through faith in Him and through the forgiveness we receive from Him, we have life eternal. **I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father but by Me.** Those were Jesus' words to His disciples.

How many people hear those words and yet it seems to make no difference to them? However, I still believe it is not our place to judge. We are simply charged with taking the message to people and praying that God will give growth and as we go, we go in peace.

Now how we get that message into our communities is the challenge facing our Church. That is what we need to address in the time we have left. It is our responsibility.

I had a dream once. There was a family lived downstairs from us in Paisley when I was a teenager. They were the family from hell. One night I had a dream. I was in heaven and surrounded by people who were all happy and then I saw this neighbour and she said to me: why didn't you tell me?

I don't want anyone to come to me one day in God's kingdom and ask me that question. Do you?

If the answer is no to that question, then what are you going to do? What are we going to do with the time we have left to ensure that no one we know fails to hear the message of forgiveness, of life and of hope?

Go in peace. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you.