

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Revd Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 10th May 2020

Fourth Sunday after Easter.

“Do not be worried or upset,” Jesus told them. “Believe in God and believe also in me I am the way, the truth and the life; no one goes to the Father except by me.”

It has been niggling away inside me since the very beginning of this pandemic shutdown.

Did the powers that be within the Churches in Scotland panic about the immediate closing of all church buildings?

As I wrote on the 22nd March, our Interim Moderator and Session Clerk had little option but to accede to notification given. And since then, we have done our best at Merrylea to offer some form of worship each week, as others have done in different ways. Closing churches for public worship is one thing, but not to be allowed to have church buildings open at all for the private prayers of individuals is another matter. And I do wonder if the right decision was made.

Some may be horrified by my even raising such a question. After all, the Church has a responsibility to safeguard people at all times and to encourage communities in responding to our civic duty to do all we can to support the NHS and others in this time of national crisis. Others may ridicule my questioning of kitchen-sink use of social media saying that ‘he was always part of the awkward squad’. But my discomfort has nothing to do with a desire to be awkward. Rather it’s got to do with the place we think the Church has within our society.

Not once have I heard or read that clergy are key-workers who exercise an essential public function. Albeit, one which is rooted in the architecture and layout of their churches and the liturgical pattern they carry out within them. Holy Week and Easter came and went as though of little or no great significance for the population. Not only was this unique within my own experience of ministry over forty years, it was an historic happening in which, I believe, much was revealed about how much the Church has lost confidence in its own distinctive values and role in society. At the very moment of its highest celebration, the Church seemed content for the Government and/or Scottish Parliament to set the moral tone.

For thirty years I had the privilege of being minister of a congregation whose spiritual home was one of the most historic medieval church buildings in Scotland. Over centuries, the community grew up around its church. My ministry there was therefore rooted in its history as I fulfilled the responsibility to lead worship, administer the sacraments and tend the sick in succession to a long line of clergy who had done the same. This we each did as a way of seeking a connection between our generation of people and the God who exists over all time. It was a kind of spiritual anchoring. But isn’t that what church buildings are about?

The continuing presence of church buildings, open, welcoming, is an expression of the continuity of God’s love over time and space; and the worship and prayers of those who venture within are an expression of that desire to make a change for the better, within society and the world, so that dignity, justice and peace may be enjoyed by every human soul.

Making a change for the better is not only a noble ambition, it is a basic responsibility for every human being. We may have not experienced the stomach churning pangs of abject hunger, or the fear of not knowing where our next meal was coming from, but surely, as civilised human beings with a Christian sensitivity, we all hunger for a society in which the extremes of poverty, ignorance, hatred and injustice are eradicated.

To some, that may sound an idealistic dream, and impossible hope. Especially when confronted by seemingly overwhelming need and intractable problems. It is so easy to feel powerless. But this weekend, which marks the 75th anniversary of VE Day, reminding us of the human sacrifice of past generations, ought to empower all of us who care deeply about these things to realise that working together, we can make a difference.

Today also marks the beginning of Christian Aid Week.

Each year, Christian Aid nudges us to rise above our own immediate, personal concerns and local church activities to make a difference for those struggling to live on life's edge. It challenges us within the Churches to stand together in our commitment not to simply accept things as they are; encourages us to speak out and act together for a different world; and offers us a glimpse of a human face to Christ's commandment to love one another as he loves us. Not being able to gather together for worship makes it more difficult, but I urge you to support Christian Aid in this work by making a financial donation to further its work. You can do this on-line, or by sending your donation to Christian Aid Scotland, Sycamore House, 290 Bath Street, Glasgow G2 4JR.

Strange, difficult and uncertain times we may be living through. But let us not be worried or upset. Our task is to believe – in the One who, for others, became known as the way, the truth and the life. Locked out of our church building we may be, but our faith-motivated love for others, enshrined within the very fabric of our sacred buildings, doesn't just make life better for others: it can make life different, richer, fuller for us too, in ways we cannot even begin to imagine.

A Prayer from Christian Aid for the global pandemic:

Love ... bears all things
believes all things
hopes all things
endures all things.
Love never ends.

Loving God, strengthen our innermost being with your love that bears all things, even the weight of this global pandemic, even the long haul of watching for symptoms, of patiently waiting for this to pass, watching and waiting, keeping our gaze fixed on you and looking out for our neighbours near and far. Instil in our shaken souls the belief and hope that all things are possible with your creative love: for strangers to become friends, for science to source solutions and for resources to be generously shared so that everyone, everywhere, may have what they need. Your love knows no borders and so may your love be our comfort, strength and guide for the wellbeing of all.

And the family prayer of the Church:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive

those who sin against us. Do not bring us to the time of trial but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours. Now and for ever. AMEN.