

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow.

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 28th June 2020

Third Sunday after Trinity.

“Whoever welcomes you welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. Whoever welcomes God’s messenger because he is God’s messenger will share in his reward You can be sure that whoever gives even a drink of cold water to one of the least of these my followers because he is my follower, will certainly receive a reward.” (St Matthew 10: 40-End)

As I write, the Prime Minister is announcing further relaxing of lockdown restrictions in England and, before too long, it is expected that the First Minister may do similar in Scotland. Our enforced hibernation has been in place over what must feel to many as a very long period of time. It could not have been easy for those individuals, say, with mental health or particular medical issues, or young families to have had to experience living within their four walls all this time. Their sense of release must be tangible, even though, it be far from total freedom to resume life as it was before the pandemic.

Whatever life was before the pandemic, one thing is certain. It is not going to be business as usual afterwards. The virus is never going to simply disappear and, like people the world-over, we are going to have to adapt our ways of living; making changes both individually and within society. During these months of lockdown, with so many people self-isolating for many differing reasons, not being able to see family members or close friends, it would seem a greater sense of neighbourliness and generosity has often been experienced. Strangers have attended to shopping requirements, collecting medicine from pharmacies, ensuring individuals have been safe. Members of churches, including our own congregation at Merrylea, have been much involved in this. A welcome god-send to so many vulnerable people and others living alone. How good would it be if this renewed social awareness could continue? Sounds simple enough but requires determined change being made to our would-be priorities.

There is another change to our society’s life that I, personally, would rejoice in welcoming. A re-balancing between that which is regarded as politically correct and that which is common-sense. There are so many reasons. Let me briefly offer just a couple.

Throughout the pandemic lockdown, politicians both in London and Edinburgh have been at pains to assure us that, eventually, the virus will be defeated. What they have been less inclined to admit however is that a vaccine will be required first and, then, global inoculations. Even, then, the virus will never just disappear. Consequently, people have been held virtually housebound regardless of their wishes, fitness, circumstance. While I have no desire to cause infection to another, neither do I think it right that my free-will should be denied. We live in a proud, historic democracy in which freedom of the individual is held sacrosanct. Provided that safe-guards can be put in place, there is no reason for the over-70s not to be allowed freedom of choice or liberty of movement. That is what treating people in a ‘grown-up’ manner involves. Maturity involves a person taking responsibility for self and others. Less political-speak and more plain truth would therefore be welcome.

My second reason is freedom of speech. Over recent years, I have been appalled by people’s lack of tolerance to even consider an opinion or belief they might not share. Free speech is one of our most important rights. Of course, it must be used with

sensitivity and responsibility. It is not a simple matter. There will always be tensions and conflicts. However, more and more the issue of what free speech is in our society has become heated and controversial, with claims and counter-claims on what people have the right to say and shouldn't say, and who should say it. This can be witnessed across the UK and West, from the rise of '*no platforming*' at universities to the instances of pseudo-offence as with the recent JK Rowling transgender row to the definition of '*hate crime*' into '*hate thought*' in legislation such as the Offensive Behaviour at Football and Threatening Communications (Scotland) Act passed recently at the Scottish Parliament.

Freedom of thought and expression is under attack all across the globe and, especially, within countries such as our own which regard themselves as great democracies. Scotland, sadly, is not excused from this growing trend. We, too, need to hold a reality check and recognise the harm of '*left*' or '*right*' intolerance and the influence of illiberal liberalism. Perhaps, as a counter to this, we need to rediscover the art of living together and how we can better relate to each other beyond material wealth and status. Maybe we need to assert not just fact and figures about the coronavirus pandemic, or immigration, or the economy, but reassert the power of the future and of hope. But, then, won't that require us having courage to relate to each other in '*grown up*' ways that are deeper, more truthful, meaningful and more powerful than mere celebrity status, money and position?

The places where we are still, are in some form of lockdown. The spirit that is born and finds strength through Jesus of Nazareth offers us the self-same things it always has – a powerful, energising, enabling sense of peace, joy, comfort, healing, wisdom. It is something that will discomfort the influential, the arrogant, the vain and the overly proud. It's what enables us to speak love aloud, freely.

Love has no place for intolerance of any kind.

It never has had. Never will.

For God is love and God is found wherever love is.

Prayer:

God of love, I thank you for all your mercies towards me as I pray for those who hunger and thirst for justice and struggle simply to survive. The hardships I now face are put into stark perspective when I recall the inequality and unfairness under which countless people must live. Sustain those suffering famine, poverty and disease and all affected by Covid-19 in their long journey towards health and liberation. For those I love and all who may love me I pray; and for friend and stranger alike who may have even greater need of the Church's prayers at this time. May they know of my appreciation for their kindnesses, and may I be a source of kindness and blessing to them. For all who care for others whether on the streets, at home, in hospital, hospice or care-home that they may feel supported and strengthened in their ministry of good. Loving God you know my fears and my joys. May I live at peace with myself, with all whom I know and with you. This I ask in Jesus' name in whose words I say 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 sin 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. AMEN.