

Merrylea Parish Church, Glasgow

Pastoral Homily by the Locum, the Reverend Jim Gibson.

Sunday, 26th July 2020

Seventh Sunday after Trinity.

“Since Christ suffered physically, you too must strengthen yourselves with the same way of thinking that he had ... you must live lives controlled by God’s will and not by human desires. The end of all things is near. You must be self-controlled and alert, to be able to pray. Above everything, love one another earnestly. Each one, as a good manager of God’s different gifts, must use for the good of others the special gift he has received ... so that in all things praise may be given to God through Jesus Christ, to whom belong glory and power for ever and ever.” (1st Peter 4: 1-11).

This is my final homily for folks at Merrylea Parish Church. Sadly, my term as Locum comes to an end on July 31. I cannot tell you how much my wife Doreen and I have enjoyed being associated with such a welcoming and friendly congregation. From our first Sunday, we both felt very much part of the church family. Our thanks to all who made us feel that and who have since offered a depth of friendship that we hope will endure coming years. Very happily, I extended my contract from the end of April to remain as Locum for as long as possible. Now, I must take my leave and face new challenges elsewhere.

Over the past four months nations across the globe have been in lockdown. Movement has been strictly curbed and liberties, which we all took as a right of citizenship, were severely restricted because of the coronavirus known as Covid-19. Within the UK the virus has claimed over 45,000 deaths. Each and every one a fellow human being whose life mattered. Others, have been fortunate to have responded to treatment in hospital administered by an army of dedicated and selfless NHS personnel. Augmenting their work have been those who bravely continued in post whether in schools, delivering mail, collecting household rubbish or working in other spheres designated essential. All of them heroes, by any definition.

But, now, the time has come for every working person to return to their employment; for young people, especially, to return to their places of education and for us all to return to our past patterns of shopping and leisure. So important is this for the health of our economy, that leading politicians from both UK and Scottish Governments have been strongly urging people to comply. Perhaps, not surprisingly however, considerable numbers of people feel reluctant. Consequently, confidence in many areas of our country’s economy is at a record low. And so it has been critical that both governments provide business support beyond the easing of our restrictions. Clearly, the economic impact of Covid-19 is now being felt. Some kind of strategy that protects jobs and creates new ones, as well as strengthening the social security safety net is, therefore, urgently required to prevent people being swept into unexpected poverty by an economic storm not of their own making.

What about the Church? In hindsight - always a dangerous thing - I believe the Church has not covered itself in glory during this pandemic. You may disagree. Though I understand the reasoning behind the closure of church buildings on health and safety grounds, the longer our churches remain closed the more distant in relevance they will become for the communities they are meant to serve. I know the Interim Moderator, Session Clerk and others at Merrylea are striving hard to reopen our particular church building as soon as is possible, and I commend their efforts. However, I fear, only too readily did the Church in Scotland devolve its moral responsibilities to others for whom

The Church is not always considered a prime mover; while denying its people its uniquely sacred message of hope and comfort in times of personal extremity. Instead, we allowed our social conscience to be massaged by the wonder of Zoom. I do not criticise colleagues for doing so. It was the best many could do. Rather, it is the lack of confidence and courage of those who considered such a situation to be acceptable to which I point.

And what about the church at Merrylea? Is there a lack of confidence and courage to be found there? It need not be. For over one hundred years, the faithfulness of this congregation has proved a blessing to the surrounding community. That should be something of immense pride. Now, our forebears in faith ask no less from the present membership.

In common with many congregations, the Church at Merrylea has experienced aspects of decline from its past heady days of being such a strong and vibrant congregation. Naturally, this has raised questions over what the future may hold, while individuals experience a lack of confidence caused by uncertainty. That's why it has been particularly encouraging to witness the Sunday worshipping congregation gradually increase in number. That, in itself, is sure sign of the longing existing within individuals for the message of love, welcome, acceptance and inclusion that the Christian gospel teaches. And of the promise of hope of better ways of living and inter-relating which comes when the Church prods and challenges society's ways in order to discover fresh meaning, and purpose and relevance in life and living.

Before long, a new chapter in the congregation's history will begin when linked with our neighbouring friends at Newlands South. No doubt, the future will bring both reassurance and challenge. As our Scripture passage indicates, nothing remains the same for ever. Current practices and activities need evaluated, just as the needs of an ever evolving parish need to be regularly appraised. This will not necessarily please everyone. However, complacency is the death knell of many a congregation. Just as members of the congregation rose to the challenges of lockdown by embracing the requirements or the loneliness of friends or neighbours so the opportunities lying ahead, as a linked congregation with a new minister, will equally be met. And met with a confident faithfulness enabling the congregation to better embrace new ways of reaching out, extending the healing, hope-giving reach of the Church into a frightened, scary and unconfident world.

Merrylea Parish Church is comprised of some remarkable people. People of great kindness, talent, generosity and faith. People who are striving, as best as they can, to let love live in their life. May that love dwell in all and pervade all. And may it be the source of blessing to all.

Prayer:

Loving God, we are living through a strange and uncertain time. After months of restriction and lockdown, people are facing the responsibility of freedom in a different world as restrictions are lifted yet the threat of viral infection remains. Build up our confidence to live life as best we can. Children need education and the country needs its industry and commerce to function. For all who face the daunting challenges and workloads of developing new ways of teaching and working, we pray. Through the encouragement of others, may foreboding be eased so that all may remain calm as our living gradually returns to a new normality. Within our church we pray for Robert our Interim Moderator, Ralph our Session Clerk and others helping them as they strive to have our building reopened for worship. As we face a new future may we do so with undaunted faithfulness, each of us using the gifts we have to live as joyful people whose song is Alleluia in the best of times but in the worst of times too. And may we sing that song in our hearts, even when we can't sing it with our lips. For all who need

our prayers, we pray Lord God, that they may know your presence standing with them giving strength, shelter and comfort. God of compassion, hear our prayer offered in Jesus' name.

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. Now and forever. AMEN.