

## Bennochy Church: 19th March 2017

A good writer of history writes for their audience. I am not suggesting for a moment, they write just what people want to hear. That would be far too predictable and too narrow. It is more than that. The author needs to make connections with their readers, so that their words make some kind of sense. This involves an understanding of what is important to people, their history, where they have come from and their hopes for the future. The story they weave, must interconnect with the stories of their readers. A good story is one you cannot put down. A good story is one where you end up not being able to distinguish between the written word and the story of the reader. They become one. That is what makes any written word come alive.

The writer of the Matthews gospel is seeking to do exactly that. In chapter five he reuses a phrase, over and over again, that connect his readers to the present and importantly, to the past, at the same time. He takes them back to an historical event, so ingrained in their minds, that the whole ethos and ethics of their nation, is based upon what happened there. It is that important.

For us, the equivalent might be, the wars of Scottish independence, William Wallace and Robert Bruce, the declaration of Arbroath (1320), the Reformation, the Act of Union in 1707, the great thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, the new Scottish parliament opened on 12th May 1999, or even

"Brexit". Events that are, or will become, synonymous with defining moments in our history.

The bible loves mountain experiences. So many of the great biblical stories have taken place, on around or near mountains. Jesus said, "*You have heard that is was said...*". and what had been said before was God's law, given by God to Moses and his people, at Mount Sinai. In shorthand, it is the ten commandments. Exodus chapter 20. Jesus is saying to people, this in one sense is not new. You have actually heard this somewhere before.

For Matthew, writing to a Jewish Christian audience, it was hugely important for him to show that Jesus had not come to do away with the law of Moses. Jesus could hardly dismiss one of the pivotal moments in their history. And Matthew does this almost to the point of overstating his case. In the words of Jesus, he says, want to get to the Kingdom of heaven? Then obey the law more faithfully than the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees. I always believed that Jesus had a problem with the Pharisees, or is that just another example of false news! Maybe these guys were better than we were led to *believe*! I actually think that is true, but that is for another day!

Jesus comes across as the good guy! That bit about keeping the Law, that's what the crowd wanted to hear. That is the bit that

allowed people to stay connected and listen to the truth of Jesus words, that came later. It enabled his Jewish Christian readers, to literally read on. Otherwise, the hill side might have cleared as quickly as a football terracing ,when the home team is losing badly or, worse, even turn nasty. Turn to Matthew 7: 28 - 29, "*When Jesus finished saying these things, the crowd was amazed at the way he taught. He wasn't like the teachers of the law; instead he taught with authority.*" People stayed to full time.

Matthew makes these kind of connections all the way through the gospel. Dipping into the Old Testament and using that as evidence for the life and claims of Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. If he had not done that, Jesus claims would have been dismissed. Matthew always has his readers in mind. He has a point to make and a way of doing it. His Old Testaments quotes are not random. They are there for a purpose. Today we would use the term 'context'. How well do we know the people we are talking to? And how do we make our words relevant, so that we at least get a hearing.

I believe meaningful connections are no longer made in the context of church. That is a bold statement. I know that. I now believe connections are made in community. But for that to happen, we need to know the stories of our community and what is important to the people. And where are the forums, the 'spaces', where stories can be shared and where we can listen?

I shared with the Kirk Session a meeting I attended in Hayfield Community centre. The church was acting as a catalyst to see if the Hayfield and Bennoch Community Council could be reformed. In that 'space', stories were shared and for me it was a real eye opener, as to what people were having to cope with in their local area. For now, the details are not important, but as a place of listening to stories it certainly was. I am not saying for a moment, we solved any problems, but important questions were raised about the local area and the meaning of community.

Meaningful connections bring down barriers and remove suspicion. In creating genuine relationships and building trust, listening is vital. Only then, will we be granted the respect that enables our words to be heard. It is only when we journey with people in their pain, suffering and distress; where people recognise that their issues, are our issues also, then and only then will people work with us, as partners.

I don't for a moment believe that we are here as a church to proclaim a law, just to be obeyed. God is bigger than that. The blessing of God comes through the greatest of commands. Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbour as you love yourself. If we are to be heard, let us first show compassion, work for justice and seek equality for all. Amen.