

Bennochty church 7th April 2019

For the church of Scotland, the next era, is going to be one of significant change. At this year's General Assembly a new radical action plan will be debated. At presbytery, there are conversations taking place about the creation of a Presbytery of Fife, bringing the three presbyteries of Dunfermline, St Andrews and Kirkcaldy together. And Kirkcaldy presbytery is in the midst of restructuring its own Presbytery plan, that will have direct implications for every charge in the Presbytery, including Bennochty. When so many ministers are soon to retire, where should the ministries of the church be placed, and what are the suitable, 'fit for purpose' buildings, that will take forward the mission of the church. Bennochty will not be immune to these changes, and nor should we.

In all of this state of flux, we need to be careful. It is not about change for changes sake, nor can it simply be a change to our structures alone, in the long run that will change nothing, and in the midst of all of this, what about our deeply held traditions?

You do something once, it is seen as new, bold, radical. You do it a second time, it becomes a tradition. We find it so difficult to let go. We become locked into the past. But for the new to emerge, we need to release people's time and energy, from that which is no longer working. What is in the past, stays in the past. It can never be reclaimed.

Paul, in writing to the church at Philippi makes absolutely clear, if any one was to trust in the traditions of their faith. It would be him. He gives us a brief biography. Circumcised at a week old. An Israelite by birth, of the tribe of Benjamin, a pure blooded Hebrew. By trade he was a Pharisee, zealous to the point of persecuting the early church; remember Paul's history, and he obeying the commands of the law, without fault. He says if you are looking for tradition. Look no further. I have it all.

The Church of Scotland and its traditions date back to 1560. A long and distinguished history. For many centuries the church was at the centre of our nations education, social work and health. Eventually all of these taken over by the state. Many of our laws find their original root in scripture. But many of our traditions today, don't actually go back that far in history. The Victorians have a lot to answer for. In the church today we still mirror much of 'Victorian' Britain - for example, Sunday schools, choirs, the organ and youth organisations. They all begun with the best of intentions. And in the midst of the empire, mission went hand in hand with exploration and trade. Think of David Livingstone in Africa.

These ancient words of Paul, were not just a challenge to his Jewish society, they are a challenge to us today. Paul's says, there is something much more valuable. What I once thought of as absolutely vital, the very basis of what I believed, and how I lived my life, he now describes as that fit for the bin. That is his

words. We fail to grasp the enormity of that statement. It is like theological tectonic plates shifting. His very understanding of God, shifting from under his feet.

I believe that the church today, needs that same 'Damascus road' experience, in our understanding of what the church is meant to be. What is our purpose? What do we hold onto, and what we let go, and why do we do the things we do? It is all about culture, defined as, *the way we do things around here*. Paul is challenging us to think about, why we do the things we do? If Bennochy church was not here, would anyone outside the church actually notice?

I like to think that the spirit of God is bubbling away, fermenting, at the edges of our traditions, and challenging us to move on and beyond them, into a world that is unknown. That is the pilgrim journey. That is the road of faith. In which we will need new traditions.

Change is not just about giving up things, it is also about what we will gain. Paul says, even though I cast aside the traditions of my faith, I gain Christ, and am united with him, in life and in death. Being put right with God, he says, is not about following any laws or traditions. It comes through Jesus Christ. Paul is here putting into words his 'eureka' moment. That encounter with Christ on the Damascus road.

I am sure that if you pushed Paul on this, he would still say that the traditions of his faith still had value. Reality is always a bit more grey, that the black and white comparison presented here. But he does it to make a point. yes, the church will always need structures and traditions to support its work. There to give our life of discipleship a 'pattern' to follow, but it must not become our primary purpose.

I suspect that much of what I have said, you agree with, yet, we still find it hugely difficult to give up what we have always known and to break out of our comfort zone. The mind says, 'you're absolutely right', the heart says, I am comfortable with what I know. Think how difficult it must have been for Paul. Steeped in Jewish tradition, to become an ambassador for Christ.

My hope is that all the discussions that are going on in the life of the church, will help us see beyond our traditions, to what they originally pointed to. And if we need to let go, let us do so in faith. To trust God in the new and vulnerable places. And I am sure, that in the new traditions that will be formed, God will travel with us. God says, *watch, for the news things that I am doing*. Amen.