

## **Bennochty church: 2nd February 2020**

This morning I want to think about this question; *why do we still come to church?* When most of the country has decided not to bother, why do we still attend church? I want to add there is more to the Christian faith than simply coming to church on a Sunday. It is not just about attendance or membership. But for the moment let's focus on that.

The last church census was carried out in 2016. Here are some key facts, and remember these are for all denominations in Scotland:

- The number of people who regularly attend church services in Scotland, has fallen by more than half, over the last 30 years
- There are around 390,000 regular churchgoers, down from 854,000 in 1984.
- It revealed that 42% of churchgoers were aged over 65
- 7.2% of Scotland's population regularly attend church, down from 17% in 1984;

That decline has continued since 2016. In 2016 the membership of the Church of Scotland was about 350, 000. By 2018 it had dropped by another 25, 000. You can see where we are going here.

We could turn the question the other way round. So let's do that. *Why do the vast majority of the population not attend church?* We will all have our own answers to that question and we could debate

that. Maybe we should. If the church is to survive into the next 10-20 years, it is a question that needs to be addressed.

There is one thing that the church does which is unique. That no one else does and that is to worship God. I looked up 'worship' and this is one definition, *the feeling or expression of reverence and adoration for a deity*. In other words, worship begins with a belief in God. One of the complicating issues is, God is understood in many different ways.

In the last national census, taken in 2011, nearly 54 % identified as Christian. Even accepting that figure will have declined quite a lot since then, it is still be substantially greater than 7.2%. See what I am getting at. If more than 7.2% of the population believe in God, then why do they not come to church? Are we not in the God business? And think about it, we have a 100% monopoly on worship!

There has been a rising number of people who claim to adhere to no religion. In a UK survey in 2017, the figure was over 50%.

We are obviously failing to make a connection. The old traditions have passed. The rites of passage that connected church and community are no longer there. Just like Jesus being presented in the temple, for an act known as the ceremony of purification. People no longer present their children for baptism.

I attended Sunday School and Bible Class and joined the church late teens / early 20's, but I was probably the last generation to do so. As connections break and relationships are broken, what is the link today, that would encourage people, to even think about God.

Without that relationship or invitation, no one is going to bother coming to church.

Over the past decades, as the church has struggled to maintain its place in society, it has attempted to restructure how it does church. I can remember many attempts to do so, and we are in the middle of another one, it is called *the radical action plan*. All these attempts to do things differently have failed, and they will continue to fail, unless, we become more than just the church, for the sake of sustaining the church, and start to be more of church in the community. That is where new relationships are built. We need to move on from just maintaining the institution. We can't keep on doing the same things and expect to get different results.

Many years ago I read a great book. It was called *the Isaiah vision*, by a man called Raymond Fung. One of the reasons it is a great book, it only has 52 pages. That is my kind of book! The whole book is about Isaiah 65: 20-23. let me read them to you;

*Babies will no longer die in infancy, and all people will live out their life span. Those who live to be a hundred will be considered young. To die before that would be a sign that I had punished them.*<sup>21-22</sup> *People will build houses and get to live in them—they will not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine—it will not be drunk by others. Like trees, my people will live long lives. They will fully enjoy the things that they have worked for.*<sup>23</sup> *The work they do will be successful, and their children will not meet with disaster. I will bless them and their descendants for all time to come.* (Good News)

That is the 'Isaiah vision'. I think that's an agenda that everyone can buy into to. So where do we begin? We begin by being a listening community. We don't say to people, we have your answers, come to us. God is already out there, ahead of us, in the community. In listening we take the first steps to partnership. It says, we are concerned about the same things you are concerned about. Our motivation will be different, but we seek the same transformation in the lives of people and communities.

And here is where worship comes in. Raymond Fung said, an invitation to worship, comes before than invitation to discipleship. It is an invitation to meet with God, before an invitation to follow him. So we come to church to encounter God, and hope, we leave different people. We shouldn't be asking people to come to church, for we are inviting them, to meet with God. Amen.