

Bennochy church 23rd April 2017

Did you know that the results are out? Have you read them? I am not talking about, Strictly come preaching (that would be a good watch?), or *Master chef* (how many food programs can there be?), Anne likes the *great pottery throw down*. I am not talking about referendums or election results. Plenty of them to look forward to. No, I am talking about the results of the *2016 Scottish church census*. This statistical exercise is carried out about every 5 years. I know you can make statistics say what you want.

Here are the headlines, as reported by the BBC.

1. The number of people who regularly attend church services in Scotland has fallen by more than half over the last 30 years. Not good news.
2. There are around 390,000 regular churchgoers north of the border, down from 854,000 in 1984. (all denominations). Still a significant number. In fact, more people attend church every week than go to the cinema or to football matches and more Scottish people are church members than belong to a political party.
3. 7.2% of Scotland's population regularly attend church, down from 17% in 1984; that is sobering. (in Fife it is just 4.7% dropping to 3.3% est. for 2025)

4. 42% of churchgoers were aged over 65. Have a look around. That is average for Scotland.
5. Four-fifths of church leaders (79%) are male, with an average age of 57;

Lead researcher Dr Peter Brierley said the figures indicated a crisis in Christianity across Scotland. So what was the main headline on the BBC? In big bold letters, Dramatic drop in church attendance in Scotland. The national press love a bad news story! And one leading cleric (who?) said the findings presented a "crisis and an opportunity" for Christians in Scotland.

Let's give this story a bit of positive spin, without underestimating the challenge that lies ahead for the church in Scotland.

I want to share with you some of the response by the Church of Scotland, by Rev Norman Smith, convener of the Mission and Discipleship Council. he said, *These figures show that churches remain an important and relevant part of Scottish life. That is before you consider the enormous contributions that church members are making to communities across Scotland. Church members are involved in everything from staffing food banks to running dementia cafes, welcoming refugees, youth work and much more. Church members also raise hundreds of thousands every year for charities here and overseas.* We need to recognise

that the church is in our communities in Scotland. What we need is the confidence 'to be' church in these places, and share the story of God, that is important to us.

He goes on to say this, *The reasons for decline in church going are many and have been well researched. Changes in working patterns, leisure activities and family life have all contributed as has increasing secularisation. Within our society Sunday is increasingly no longer seen as different, but just another day to cram full of activity.*

*In addition, church-going used to be something you learned from your parents so the pattern of going to church was instilled in you as a child. However as each generation has moved further and further away from that inherited pattern, less people have learned about going to church. All of this has contributed to the decline of church-going in Scotland.* I don't think we would disagree with any of that. We know the headlines, we don't need the BBC to tell us.

The passage about Philip and the Ethiopian official is all about sharing the story of God, by taking the opportunity that arises and seizing the moment. (*Carpe diem*) The positive spin given, is that decline in attendance offers the church greater opportunity to share the gospel story. Norman Smith says, *The primary task of the church has not changed throughout the ages but the way we tackle that task continues to evolve. In the midst of decline you can find growth and in the midst of growth you can find decline. That is how it has always been.*

If only it was that simple. The biggest challenge as I see it, is our lack of confidence in the story of Jesus, in an ever increasing secular society. Scotland is becoming one of the most secular societies in Scotland. We believe, no one wants to listen. If we think like that, we miss a crucial aspect of faith. It is not us who speaks, it is God. We change nothing, for only God can transform lives. Like the Ethiopian official, who ended up getting baptized.

*Do you understand what you are reading? 'Carpe diem'. Seize the day!* Beginning from where this man was, Jesus Christ is introduced as the answer to his own questions. What are the questions of life that people are wrestling with today? How do we listen to them and if it is appropriate, what do we say? How do we journey with people today, in a world with a growing enthusiasm for pilgrimage? How do we make these connections? Where are the opportunities for faith to become part of people's lives? Safe places to share their stories and to hear our vulnerabilities and doubts.

When was the last time we really looked at the communities we are part of, and said, where is God ahead of me in this place and how can I join in. We take God nowhere. He is not in our pocket! Our God is bigger than that. He is in every conversation. In every moment. Every tear. Every loss. Every laugh. These are our opportunities to share the story of Jesus. Encounters to transform lives and change the world. If we do not believe that, then what is the story of Jesus all about?

Behind every statistic is a person. Behind every opportunity, we need to believe, is God. Amen.