

SERMON – 2/1/22**'Sing a New Song'**

Psalm 96:1-13

Hebrews 1:1-4

“Sing a new song to the Lord!. Sing to the Lord all the world! Sing to the Lord and praise Him! Proclaim every day the good news that He has saved us.” (Psalm 96:1,2))

Perhaps it's because I've had a little bit of space over the last few days but I've had time to stop and listen. There have been no church meetings to plan or to attend, no decisions to put into effect, a break from the utter relentlessness of phone-calls and emails. Of course people are not expecting everyone to be working normal hours at the moment so there is a natural hiatus at this time of year and people have not been seeking me out. I was away for a few days to recuperate after a ridiculously manic few weeks and it was very good indeed just to be able to 'be' for a while, rather than to feel under pressure to 'do'. Apart from a few phone calls and emails in relation to a couple of urgent matters, all I have done workwise this past week is to think about this morning's service and while this sermon will not be the fruit of hours of careful Bible study and background reading, I have sought to listen for the Word of God to me as an individual, to me as a minister of the Gospel, and to us as a congregation of God's people in this place. Perhaps I should not have been surprised to hear God speak quite clearly into the relative quietness of the week, to the extent that at one stage I almost felt like asking Him to put the megaphone away because I had got the message.

In the course of what I have to say this morning I want to quote to you from what a number of fellow ministers have quite independently contributed in the past week to an online forum I belong to – perhaps I am not the only minister to have had a bit of time and space to reflect in recent days – but I think it is important for you to be aware that some of the things that I personally sensed needed to be said at the outset of this new year might be more than just my own random reflections but might in fact be a flavour of what the Spirit is saying to the churches at this significant time.

But let's start where we always must, in God's Word – today we have read from Psalm 96 about singing a new song to the Lord, and from the opening verses of the Letter to the Hebrews, one of the less-often read Christmas passages, about the subject of that new song for us as Christians, the Lord Jesus Christ who is 'the exact likeness of God's own being, sustaining the universe with His powerful word.' (Hebrews 1:3) It's all about Jesus. It's always about Jesus. It has to be.

I was beginning to reflect on what kind of a new song we ought to be singing as a church at the start of another new year of uncertainty and challenge, and beginning to form in my mind as I reflected was the idea that that new song should not only be the song of praise to God *from* the whole world that the psalmist begins with but also a song of proclamation *to* the whole world of the good news from God about salvation that the psalmist also speaks of here but which on the whole we are much slower to sing.

Hardly had that thought begun to take shape in my mind that I came across something that a colleague in our own Presbytery had written. She posted: “The new-start-ness of New Year is great. God is a God of new starts. With His help, it's out with the old (angst, sin, mess, failure) in our lives, and it's in with the new (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control).”¹ And in my heart I said, Amen. This is the heart of what we are about as a church – not only praising God but also proclaiming the good news of Christ to the world – so as we embark upon this new year together, whatever it may hold, let us “Sing a new song to the Lord” and let us “Proclaim every day the good news that He has saved us.” (vv.1,2) Maybe that is the message today and for the year ahead – sing praise to God and sing out the Gospel message to all people everywhere.

But I have also been thinking more deeply for a couple of months (and again this past week) about the sermon series I hope to begin next Sunday on the First Letter of John, looking at the theme of Christian Discipleship and it is here that I really began to feel that there was a message for us all at the beginning of the year, a year that may in fact turn out to be a Year of Discipleship. You can hardly fail to be aware that the church generally in all its branches, not least our own Church of Scotland, is facing huge challenges in the light not only of the upheavals brought upon us by Covid

these last two years but also of two, perhaps three generations of relentless decline. In terms of the institutional church, that decline is in fact terminal. We have been deaf to the fact that God has been calling us to change our ways for a very long time. When I stop and think about it, actually the entire thirty years that I have spent in ministry have been a near-constant battle to try and edge the church out of the rut we have been in, a rut that has its origins not just in the last century but in reality the one before that – if truth be told, how many of our ways of doing things have their origins in Victorian times? Time is up. We really are being called to sing an *entirely* new song, not just to update the language a bit, or to set it to a cheerier tune or play it with some different instruments, but to go back to first principles and ask ourselves what it really means (in the words of the psalm) to “Praise the Lord's glorious name,” to “bring an offering and come into His Temple,” and to “bow down before the Holy One when He appears, and tremble before Him.” (vv.8-9) What is it going to mean for us to be disciples of Jesus when the ways the church has got stuck doing things for too long are simply no longer sustainable any more? What will Christian discipleship look like for you and me in Kinross in 2021?

I was wondering about that when another minister in our Presbytery posted on his blog about the sea-change he believes is necessary if the church is to rise to the particular challenges of our time. Guess what – he was writing about Discipleship. “Discipleship has perhaps never been so vital, he writes. In an age of competing identities and the last gasps of institutions nostalgic for Christendom, discipleship forms and reforms Jesus’ followers with common purpose and a shared identity, transcending all earthly divisions and intersections. As we plan and cast vision for 2022, as we formulate mission goals and prepare sermon series, as we consider how to enthuse and entertain the Covid beleaguered congregation, spare a thought for the unglamorous, unfashionable, donkey-work of discipleship. It is the key to unlocking the riches of God’s kingdom, not just for the Church, but for the whole world.”²

And just in case I hadn't got the message, I sat down last night to put this sermon into words and yet another minister (whom I don't know personally) shared a post on the online forum from a well-known American church, offering five goals for the local church over the coming year, all of which focus on the impact of teaching church members to become disciples. The article concludes with these words: “The end game of

making more disciples is making more disciples. We reach one more for Jesus so that the family of God grows and becomes more influential in reaching a lost generation with the good news. There are still thousands of unreached people groups in the world, and when the body of Christ works together, we can get busy reaching them. Every local church is responsible for reaching the world. We can't leave it to denominations and parachurch organizations. Your church is part of the solution.”³

And unsurprisingly that takes us back to what first struck me about this morning's psalm namely that the new song we are called to sing as God's people is not only the song of praise to God that we gather to offer Sunday by Sunday and that we should be inviting the whole world to join us in singing, but is also the song of proclamation of the great acts of God, and especially the good news about salvation through Jesus Christ that is for all people everywhere, including here in Kinross, including your neighbours and mine.

On Christmas Day I indulged myself by choosing one of my favourite carols for the service here – Christians awake, salute the happy morn. I love it for many reasons but perhaps especially for the lines that speaks about the angels conspiring (literally breathing together) “in hymns of joy unknown before” - in other words they were singing a new song – and the shepherds proclaiming the wondrous story as “the first apostles of His infant fame” - in other words they were proclaiming the good news of that God has saved us. Just as the angels sang a new song that first Christmas and just as the shepherds went from having gazed upon the face of God in Christ lying in a manger proclaiming the good news, so we need to set out on this new year from the springboard of our Christmas celebrations, with a renewed vision of Immanuel, God with us, to sing the praises of God and to make known His marvellous deeds to all around us.

In other words we are to accept anew the call of Jesus: “Come with me and I will teach you.” Are you ready to sing that new song? As one of my colleagues wrote this past week: “In the UK we have succeeded in forming Christians as church-goers, consumers, activists and theological zealots. But how well do we nurture disciples?”²

I think I am beginning to get the message about what I need to be doing (and not doing) as a disciple of Jesus and as a minister. What about you? What will this year bring for you as a follower of Jesus? What will it bring

for us as a church? Let me ask you this morning to commit yourself to taking some *really* significant steps forward in the practice of your faith in the coming months.

“Sing a new song to the Lord!. Sing to the Lord all the world! Sing to the Lord and praise Him! Proclaim every day the good news that He has saved us.”

Notes:

¹. Anne Stewart -

www.facebook.com/anne.stewart.946 31st Dec.2021 at 20:27

². Dave Rankin -

www.thefoolishnessofpreaching.com/2021/12/30/discipleship-2/?fbclid=IwAR1FaU1YZJFTil6J4BOC7OgbcvRb18IhezZ1qBFBaoPQnjnsVTsiA0SjU-c 30th Dec.2021

³. Rick Warren -

www.churchleaders.com/pastors/270162-5-big-goals-for-each-new-year-of-ministry.html 31st Dec.2021