

**Minister's Report and Address – 20/3/22**  
**'Give us today our daily bread'**

Psalm 23:1-6

"The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." (Psalm 23:1)

What I have to say this morning will begin with what might be described as a minister's report or an annual review and will conclude with what will be something more like a sermon. It is important that we reflect as a congregation on our life as a church, particularly at a time of challenge and change, but it is also vital that we do so in the context of worship and from the perspective of what the Holy Spirit is saying to the church in our time and in this place.

I have mulled long and hard over what to say today. I have composed many sentences and paragraphs and then discarded them, recognising that there are many things I would really like to say but could easily just turn into a finger wagging. I want us to celebrate the good things that God is doing among us as His people but we cannot overlook the massive challenges we face, some in common with other organisations, some in common with other churches, some which are particular to our own situation.

The last two years has seen unprecedented turmoil brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and at the same time a process of review and reform (and realism) across the whole Church of Scotland as generations of chickens come home to roost.

It is two years this week since we first went into lockdown and the intervening 24 months have taken their toll in physical and mental ill-health and we still have a way to go until we can say that the pandemic is behind us.

With that cheery prospect as a backdrop, the Presbytery of Perth met last Tuesday evening at the same time as the presbyteries of Angus, Dundee, Dunkeld and Meigle, and Stirling also met, and all voted in favour of the creation of a single new presbytery whose congregations will stretch from Drymen in the west to Montrose in the east, from Blair Atholl in the north to Cleish in the south. If the General Assembly approves the plan, the new Presbytery will come into being on the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 2023.

Similar mergers of presbyteries are taking place across the country.

As I have previously described, the forward plan currently under consultation for this area will see the congregations of Arngask, Cleish, Fossoway, Kinross, Orwell & Portmoak – essentially the whole of Kinross-shire – becoming a single network of churches served by two full-time ministers and a team of readers, OLMs and worship leaders, with the church buildings in Glenfarg, Cleish and Portmoak likely to close for public worship. Similar networks are being created across the presbytery and across the whole country. In all kinds of ways, the future will not be like the past and it is simply not enough to bemoan the changes – we are where we are and if the church is to thrive we all have to play our part in rising to the challenges that we face and to walk in the obedience of faith as disciples of Jesus in our time.

Since the Kirk Session decided over two years ago that our church would take part in the Growing Young process, I have been living with the six core commitments that Growing Young research worldwide has shown are the marks of churches which are bucking the trend of decline, ageing and ultimately closure and I would like to use these today as the framework within which to review our congregational life today.

A church which is growing young is one in which Jesus' message is taken seriously. We score quite highly on that – there is appreciation of the focus on biblical preaching that we have in Sunday worship and there are currently five midweek house-groups in which some 35 people meet together every week around God's Word to learn and pray together. There is room for more. As a congregation, our focus this year is on discipleship and it is to be hoped that we will all commit ourselves to a more faithful living out of Jesus' message in our daily lives.

A church which is growing young is one in which warm community is fuelled. Again, this congregation is noted for having a family feel and for being a welcoming fellowship, although that is not the universal experience of all who come within these doors and we *all* need to play our part in building and sustaining community – I am hugely grateful to those who

have been keeping in touch with folks who have not been out at church because of the pandemic, because much as I would like to I just don't have enough hours in the day to reach out to those I once would have spoken to regularly here. Groups like the Craft Group, the Choir, Table Talk, the Guild, All Friends Together and Let's Sing have helped to maintain contact. But I'm sure I am not the only one who has felt cut off from others in the fellowship during the last two years and even now we need to work at restoring the community that has been fractured – we probably need to reach out in new ways to some older folk in the congregation who are now not able to leave their homes; and boy do we have a job to do in reconnecting with younger families.

Thirdly, a church which is growing young is one where empathy is evident. Now here is where there is a lot of work to be done. Because we have been separated from each other for so long and because communication has been difficult we all think we have had a hard time during Covid when in fact every generation has faced equally challenging circumstances, just different. We need to find ways to walk in each others' shoes at this time and there is a great need for intergenerational events when we can hear one another's stories and begin to relate to each other instead of assuming (probably wrongly) that we understand what we have each been going through. Children and young people and families have experienced things that I have never had to face, and as someone who has had to be out and about right through the pandemic I can't really comprehend what it must be like still to be feeling scared to mix with other people, just as many of you can't imagine how debilitating ministry has been looking into the lens of a camera without the benefit of the kind of reaction and response of personal contact that enables me to know that what I am saying is connecting and is helpful. Never in nearly thirty four years of full-time ministry have I felt more like walking away than I have in the last six months, and I don't say that seeking sympathy but to prompt more conversations amongst you all that will help us to understand and pray for one another more faithfully.

Fourthly a church which is growing young is one which is active in its neighbourhood. It is fair to say that Kinross Parish Church is

known both locally and in the wider church for being active in the community but this is something that we really need to step up if we are to have the kind of impact that will lead to future growth. Initiatives like Alpha and Traidcraft and the work of the Eco-team are well-respected and enable the deepening of the kind of relationships that allow us to share the Good News if we are prepared to take the opportunities they give us. Developments in recent times have included a regular church presence at the Farmer's Market and the installation of a video screen in the vestibule of the Church Centre which will enable more effective publicity of church activities and the Gospel message to the many who pass through the centre every week. But each one of us need to be much more engaged in the sharing of our faith in daily life if the (frankly) negative impression of Christians that is held by many in society today is to be turned around.

The final two commitments which Growing Young invites us to take on board are a prioritising of young families and the empowering of the young. There has been a lot of kick-back on these two so it is worth saying again that the research indicates that where churches are actively *prioritising* the young among us, then people of all ages benefit and where responsibilities are handed over (rather than clung on to) by older people there is growth rather than the decline we have become used to. What does that look like in our context? That is the million dollar question and one that requires young and old alike to engage with. Younger folk, you really need to step up here, just as us older folk need to hold back from pushing yesterday's opinions. It's not just about what we do on a Sunday or about how Pram Service or Junior Church or Crossfire or the Brigade or Family Week might develop but it's about how we grow together as a fellowship of Christ's disciples in this place, it's about how the seeds sown through Kythe can feed back in to the development of Christ's church going forward and how we share the message of God's love with all ages in our community in the coming years.

We have good foundations on which to build and it is right that we should celebrate these today but we cannot simply repeat what has happened in the past and we need to meet the challenges head on but in the faith of Christ. The whole world

has changed in the last two years and we need to be a church that is fit for purpose in our time.

On behalf of you all I want to express grateful thanks to those who have worked through the last two years to initiate and develop our online ministry, the telephone ministry and distribution of CDs – these have been (and in some cases continue to be) a godsend to many and a means of outreach to those who have not yet come through the doors of the church. I also want to thank those who have contributed in any way to the flower ministry, the music ministry, children's and young people's ministry, pastoral care, the ministry of prayer, the stewardship of our financial and property resources, the management of every-changing Covid regulations, the administration of the church's affairs, those who have kept the lines of communication open through the weekly emails and information in the newsletter and those who have produced and distributed Kinnections; thanks also to the elders and others involved in leadership of the various groups in the church, the Growing Young team and the many who have engaged with that process in giving feedback and in experimenting with new ways of doing things.

A little later in the service there will be an opportunity for questions and comments, so please be formulating these in your minds but in that context of gratitude and challenge we have today listened to God's Word in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm and our theme for reflection on the Lord's Prayer has been 'Give us today our daily bread.' So, finally, what are we to take from that as we step into a new week and as we commit ourselves to the year ahead as a congregation?

It is hard to step back from this psalm because of its familiarity and I would encourage all of you sometime in the next day or two to sit down and read it again, pausing and reflecting on each line very slowly. I'd like to suggest that we read it in the light of Jesus' teaching of us to pray 'Give us today our daily bread,' for that, too, because of its familiarity, demands a fresh pair of eyes.

So far in this series on prayer we have thought about how we honour God by giving Him His rightful place in our lives and in our world, and about how we lament the state of things in the world

and go on from there to discern God's will in order to put flesh on what the coming of the Kingdom will be like. Today we need to take on board the fact that Jesus calls us to pray about the most basic and immediate things of all.

If you consider how praying for daily bread must be for one of our fellow Christians enduring the siege of Mariupol today or trying to feed children in the context of drought today, it must take us to a much more basic place in our praying than we have perhaps ever been. 'Give us today our daily bread.'

We read in Psalm 23 of lacking nothing if the Lord is our shepherd. The promise is of green pastures – what a feast for a sheep in a middle eastern context! The promise is of quiet waters – what a prospect for a sheep under a baking sun! The promise is of refreshment of soul and of guidance along the right path – that sounds good to me in these weary and uncertain times. What does the sheep need in a dark valley but the protective presence of the shepherd, and what do we need as we face the challenges of these days but the also-promised presence of *our* Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ? We ask for *bread*, the simplest of meals, but we are promised a whole table laid out in the face of the enemy – what does that promise look like today for those sheltering from artillery fire? We ask *daily* and we are promised goodness and love *all* the days of our lives – what an encouragement in a context where it seems that even tomorrow may not come.

In the midst of the many wonderful promises of this psalm there is a challenge to us who are quick to forget about the shepherd and to forge our own path. As individuals and as a church today we are called to complete dependence on God, to pray even (perhaps especially) for the things we think we ought to be able to supply for ourselves. Should we not be *praying* for God's provision for the church in these days rather than fretting about it? Are we dedicating ourselves to asking God for our rejuvenation and renewal as His people? To pray is not to abrogate responsibility for the part we each must play – rather it is to put our actions in the proper perspective and really to engage our faith. Let us really learn how to pray 'Give us today

our daily bread' and to discover that when we trust the Good Shepherd we truly lack nothing.

Prayer

Lord, teach us to pray. Teach us to speak to you about everything. Teach us to trust you with today, to wait upon you in the moment and to leave the days to come in your perfect care. Teach us how to be your church in this place at this time, to seek your guiding and to follow your leading. Teach us to know your presence in the darkness and to fear no more. Teach us to be like little children who know our dependence on you and rest in your care. Teach us to ask little and to expect much. Build your Kingdom in us and among us. Give us today our daily bread. IN Jesus' name we pray. Amen.