

## **SERMON – 12/6/22**

Titus 1:5-9

“The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.” (Titus 1:5)

The Church in our country faces incredibly uncertain times in the coming years. This is not something that is unique to the Church of Scotland, although that is where you and I are going to feel it most, and the upheaval of the last two years is not the cause of the uncertainty or the reason why changes require to be made, although it has certainly hastened the pace of what was already happening. The fact that barely half of our worshipping congregation is gathered here this morning, and that an even higher proportion of those who were previously volunteering in areas of ministry, mission and service have taken a step back, changes the whole dynamic of church life and challenges what it is possible for us to accomplish, forcing us to re-evaluate the way we do things. The Church of Jesus Christ is a work in progress because you and I, who are members of that Church, are ourselves a work in progress.

Just like Titus in Crete nearly two thousand years ago we need to be straightening things out to meet the challenges of the day and we too need to be appointing new elders to oversee the household of God. In this morning's reading we discover that God has set in place an order for His household, the Church, that is built on the positive encouragement of healthy teaching and righteous living and on the refuting of false teaching and a turning away from ungodliness, and what I would like to do this morning is to reflect with you on some of the building blocks and tools we are given to shape the life of the church in our time and to encourage each of us to consider what our part might be in that at this particular time of change.

Paul reminds Titus that the reason he had been left in Crete was to finish off the work that they had been doing together – ‘to straighten out what was unfinished’ as he puts it – and to ‘appoint elders in every town.’ This is about the establishment of some order in a newly established church and it's actually not so very different a situation from the one where we are in as we

seek to re-establish church in dramatically changed circumstances. The apostle has brought the Gospel to an area for the first time and people have come to faith in Christ – a church has been born, and it was important that while Paul moved on somewhere else, some kind of framework was put in place in order to ensure that this group of new believers would continue to grow in faith and not fall prey to false teachers who might come along at any time. Titus was the one who had been appointed to get that framework in place. It may be that Paul had had in mind exactly which individuals would be best for the different roles and that he 'directed' Titus whom to appoint; or it may be the case (and I personally think that this is more likely) that Paul gave some direction – as he does here in these verses – as to the *kind* of leaders such a church would need and what would qualify them for office, leaving Titus to do as he directed, to find the right people in Crete specifically and to equip them for their role.

Now, although we have been used to a particular order in the Church of Scotland, I think we are facing such unprecedented change in our time that we need to look afresh at how the early church began to shape itself as we shape ourselves for the years ahead of us – and that has implications for our structures, for the leaders we appoint and for ourselves as we allow God to have His way in shaping what we each become as disciples of Jesus in our time.

When it comes to the nature of church leadership in the New Testament, the first thing that must be said is that there is no single prescribed way to set up a church. If there was such a prescription, I don't suppose we would have as many different ways of doing things in the Christian Church as we do. The New Testament uses four different words for church leaders or officials in the church. There is *diakonos* (literally 'servant' but sometimes given as 'deacon' or 'minister'), there is *episkopos* (literally 'overseer' but often translated as 'bishop' or 'superintendent'), there is *poimen* (literally 'shepherd' but also rendered 'pastor') and there is *presbuteros* (literally 'elder' but also understood in some traditions as 'priest'). Now, in English, all of these words – bishop, deacon, elder, minister, pastor, priest, superintendent – are recognisable as names given to church leaders in different denominations. All of them derive from these four biblical terms,

but in different denominations (and here's the complication!) they all take slightly different forms and they all relate to one another in different ways. In a Roman Catholic or Anglican context, you will have a bishop in charge of a diocese, a priest in charge of a parish, and a deacon preparing to become a priest. In a Baptist Church you will have a pastor and deacons leading a congregation with no outside authority at all; in a Presbyterian setting you will have a minister and elders in each congregation, each answerable to the other within and beyond the congregation; in some churches, deacons look after the finance and property, whereas in others a deacon is a kind of pastoral assistant, and in still others a deacon is someone who is on the way to becoming a priest.

In thinking about how we straighten out what remains unfinished in the life and mission of the church in our place and in our time I think we need to stop getting hot under the collar about different ways of doing things in different churches at different times and about the way we have traditionally organised ourselves and instead start celebrating the glorious diversity of gifts that are inspired by the Spirit of God in every congregation of God's people, focussing on enabling people to use their gifts in harmony to further the Kingdom and encouraging those who adopt healthy teaching and correcting those who speak against it.

Perhaps you were taken aback by some of the strong statements in our reading earlier – 'an elder must be blameless.' Leaders need to be free from negative traits: not overbearing, writes Paul, not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain (v.7) – and noted for positive traits: hospitable, one who loves what is good, who is self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined, in short, (v.8) "holding firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, in order to encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it." (v.9)

Who is equal to such a task? None of us is perfect but, as I said at the start, we are all a work in progress and part of our calling as disciples of Jesus – all of us, whether leaders or not – is to allow the Holy Spirit to make us more Christ-like, more like Jesus, asking (as Jesus taught us to pray) that we might not be led into temptation but that we might instead be delivered from evil, seeking God's Kingdom by seeking to do God's will. This in fact is the fundamental calling of the Church and so it should not come

as a surprise to us that we need to be led by people who are committed to living out the way of Christ so that we all may be encouraged to live that same way and declare to the world that we don't need to remain trapped in its dying ways any longer. What are given here as characteristics for elders are just a spelling out of what should be the way of life of every Christian and, when it comes right down to it, as we seek to straighten out and put in order what we need to be as Christ's Church in Kinross-shire in the aftermath of Covid and in the light of so many years of complacency and decline in the life of the church, we *all* need to be involved in rebuilding from the ground up, we need to be reforming and renewing – growing young if you like.

Perhaps the focus needs to be less on the text with which I began – Paul's instruction to Titus to put in order what was unfinished and appoint elders to take things forward – and more on the text with which our reading ended, where the focus is not just on the the church leader but on what leadership is intended to enable: “The elder must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught in order to encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.” (Titus 1:9)

I am put in mind of a number of occasions throughout the Bible where God's people are set on a new course after a period of drifting. It happens with Moses after the wilderness wanderings (Deuteronomy 30 & 31); it happens with King Josiah's reforms after decades of wayward leadership (2 Kings 22 & 23); it happens with Ezra after Israel returns from exile in Babylon (Nehemiah 8). Read those chapters this afternoon – it will do your heart good. On each occasion God's Word is simply read, its message is applied, the call is given: 'Choose life!' and often with weeping, always with faith, people turn from disobedience and dishonesty and embrace what is good and honouring to God. That's what Paul is asking Titus to do in Crete by ordering the church in such a way that the trustworthy message is taught and that those who try to hoodwink people with a different philosophy are stopped in their tracks. And that's what we need to do in our time and in this place – as Growing Young puts it: take Jesus' message seriously. All of us are a work in progress; our church is a work in progress. Who is ready to take things forward at this time? We need servant-hearted deacons; we need visionary

overseers; we need shepherd-hearted pastors; we need elders who will shape the church for a challenging future; we need disciples and we need leaders. Let's get our sleeves rolled up and get on with the job.