

SERMON – 25/9/22
'Five Marks of Mission 5 - Renewal'

Romans 8:18-25

“Hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have?” (Romans 8:24)

I was chatting to both my neighbours yesterday afternoon – on the one side my neighbour was washing his car while I was cutting the grass and sweeping up the rowan berries that are so plentiful this year that it is making walking along the pavement quite a challenge; and a little later my neighbour on the other side was coming in from work as I was heading out to walk the dog. As we chatted, both conversations centred on the beautiful day we were all enjoying and on the wonderfully benign summer we have had this year. Something to celebrate indeed.

In other parts of the world and in sharp contrast we have seen extreme weather cause utter devastation – unprecedented monsoon rains bringing previously rarely-experienced levels of flooding in Pakistan, and in the past week alone super typhoon Nanmadol threatening millions in Japan and hurricane Fiona wreaking havoc from Puerto Rico to Nova Scotia, and earlier in the summer record high temperatures in the UK and catastrophic wildfires in France and Portugal.

Environmental concerns are the topic of discussions not just in high-level international gatherings such as COP 26 in Glasgow last year but in everyday conversations that you and I and our neighbours are part of. Because conflict in Ukraine has impacted supplies of oil and gas to Western Europe there is a real possibility that a colder-than-usual winter in our own country this year might see large numbers of people facing hardship and even death and brings home to us the fact that the actions of people in one part of the world can have unforeseen consequences even in far off places.

I was struck in our Bible reading this morning by the way in which good and bad often stand side by side and are evident consistently in what is said about the past, the present and the future, and as we look today at the theme of 'renewal', the last of the Five Marks of Mission that must shape the life of the church in

our time I would like to reflect with you on the role each one of us has to play in enabling the good to win the victory over the bad, hope to triumph over despair, and freedom to conquer slavery, and on how the church of Jesus Christ must be a beacon of light wherever there is darkness.

The Five Marks of Mission are not in any order of priority but must *all* be evident among us and through us if we are to be fulfilling our calling as disciples of Jesus to be the Body of Christ. We need to be telling, proclaiming the Gospel message to those around us rather than keeping quiet about the good news we have been entrusted with. We need to be teaching, nurturing those who have been following Jesus for many years just as much as those who are babes in Christ or have yet to take their first step of faith. We need to be tending, serving one another within the church just as Christ has served us, and serving those around us in the wider world for no other reason than that there are needs to be met. We need to be transforming, challenging the ways of the world around us by faith and prayer and by calling the powerful to account, and we also need to be treasuring what God has entrusted to us, acting as good stewards of creation and working for the renewal of God's good earth so that it may be what it was intended to be and so that all may thrive, entering into life in all its fulness. So let's look this morning at what it means for us to be part of God's work of renewal in every dimension of life.

I said a moment ago that in this morning's reading you can see good and bad alongside each other in the past, the present and the future, and if in this world's order, things generally tend towards the bad – inclined to decay, getting enslaved by the powers that be, descending into chaos – then it is the task of the people of God both to declare the promise of Christ's ultimate victory and to work to make that victory a reality by offering hope and renewal even (perhaps especially) where all seems to be lost. Today's message is one of unstoppable hope, a call to each one of us to be discontent with the apparent inevitability of suffering, of poverty, of decay and of death and to live out the hope into which we have been born by faith in Christ until the promises of Jesus are realised here and now.

Let me trace a way for you through this morning's reading that I hope will make sense of what I think we are being taught here.

First of all the apostle announces that in the past, in fact almost from the beginning, 'creation was subjected to frustration' or in another translation 'creation was condemned to lose its purpose.' What Paul is referring to is the outcome of the fall into sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, by their disobedience of God. The man and the woman were banished from the paradise garden, but there were also consequences for the whole world. In Genesis 3, God says to Adam: 'Cursed is the ground because of you... It will produce thorns and thistles for you.' (Genesis 3:17,18) But side by side with the bad, Paul also proclaims the good promise of God through the victory of Christ, 'that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.' (Rom.8:21) You see the Gospel of Christ is not just good news for you and me but for the whole created order.

The same twin themes of bad and good can be seen in what Paul writes about the present – his own present in the first century and ours in the twenty-first century. He writes in verse 18 about 'present sufferings' – something any one of us can relate to and something that has been seen across the world this summer in everything from the extremes of heat and the wildfires of July to the monsoons and hurricanes of September and the war in Ukraine. But he also writes in verse 19 about creation's present eager longing for the children of God to be revealed, a recognition that the coming redemption of the whole world is tied up with what Christ has done for us through His willingness to give His life on the cross for the sin of the world. Also, Paul uses the word 'groaning' both negatively to describe the upheavals of creation and positively to describe the prayers of those who are yearning for their promised redemption, and in that context too he uses the powerful image of childbirth (the excruciating pain of labour and the phenomenal joy of delivery) to represent the work that God is about in the world. Bad and good stand cheek by jowl.

And the very same pair of good and bad outcomes characterises the future in what Paul has to say here. Less is said about the bad, in fact, although it is clear that, unchecked and left to its own devices the world would simply spiral through suffering and

decay to a human-induced doomsday scenario of destruction and death. But Paul also rejoices here (in what is probably one of the greatest chapters in the whole New Testament) to celebrate the good that God promises – words like hope and victory, glory and freedom are what characterise the vision of what is to come and it is clear that this is both the content of the Good News of Christ and the substance of the Mission of the Church of Christ, the message and the work that should characterise the living out of our faith. So *this* must be what we are about as disciples of Jesus and as Christ's Church in Kinross every bit as much as we are about preaching and discipling and serving. We need to hold up as a vision for the world something that is much, much better than anything we see around us just now, and to enable others to take hold by faith of the firm hope that Jesus offers us so that together (in the words of a hymn that we will sing shortly) we can 'live tomorrow's life today' – that is to say, to allow God's promised way of things to be realised at least in some measure right here and now. That was the vision that inspired John Knox to seek to establish universal education in the Scotland in the 16th century, that inspired Thomas Chalmers to transform the relief of the poor in the 19th century and William Wilberforce to campaign for the abolition of slavery and that must inspire us to address the challenges of our time both in public discourse and in personal action, like the way we shop and the kind of goods we buy, the way we recycle and the way we invest in the future.

Let us not be content to maintain the worldly status quo that allows the earth's resources to be squandered for the profit of the few while the many suffer the consequences. Let us be active in our resistance of the worldly ways of greed and self-interest and power that leave the poor and the weak and the vulnerable with nothing but the crumbs beneath the table. Let us be visionary in our campaigning for what is right and good, no matter how hard it may be to achieve, rather than simply acquiescing in the decisions of those with a vested interest in finding the easiest and cheapest way forward however questionable its morality or however many people may suffer further down the road.

'Who hopes for what they have already?' asks Paul. The Kingdom of God is not here yet, but that Kingdom is what we are called to pray for and speak out for and work towards. Hope that is seen

is no hope at all, says Paul, but what we hope for and what God has promised to fulfil through Jesus Christ offers such glory and freedom that we can surely be satisfied with nothing less than devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to its coming. To quote Jesus Himself, 'With human beings this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.' (Mark 10:27)