

Last Sunday I talked about the state of the church in Scotland (POR Pic) and some of the problems we face as we contemplate the future. I did say that much of last week was negative but I do believe there is hope for us as a congregation, as well as the wider church. The church is the means by which God has chosen to work out his purposes in the world, therefore the church will never die. It may not involve the Church of Scotland in its present form but the church will continue to exist.

So, what can we do to play our part in changing the perceived wisdom that everything will continue to decline? How do we set about building up the church, and this congregation in particular?

I think the main thing is that we all need to commit to grow, and then do things that will help us grow. Why? Because God requires that his people grow toward maturity in Christ.

The writer of Hebrews says this: *¹¹ We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. ¹² In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! ¹³ Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. ¹⁴ But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.* Hebrews 5:11-14

I think there are two main lessons there:

1. Some people in that audience should have been teaching others but they had never got past the very basic truths of the faith themselves. What about us? Are you where you should be in your walk with God? Sometimes moving on to solid food is messy because it causes us to change our thinking and our habits.
2. It reinforces the importance of studying the bible, the 'solid food' because that is what enables us to distinguish between good and evil. We need to learn what the bible says so that we can make good decisions. God speaks in a variety of ways to us but the main way is through his word, so if you want God's view on something, start in his word.

Ephesians 4 is clear that the measure of maturity of the church, this congregation, is the total maturity of its members. That alone gives me hope because, as I look around, I see loads of people whose faith is alive and growing. Is there room for improvement? Of course there is. None of us is where we could be but there are clear signs of life.

There are three areas I want to look at which will help us grow and, as we grow individually, I believe the congregation will also grow. You see, if we're doing what God is asking us to do people will come to faith – that's God's plan.

First, I want to think about growing in **Worship**.

When speaking to a Samaritan woman Jesus told her: ²³ *Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.* ²⁴ *God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth.* John 4:23-24

In using the word worship I'm thinking about what we do when we gather together on a Sunday morning, but also more broadly than that. When we gather together I sense that sometimes we are more toward truth than Spirit. I know that's a generalisation but I think we need to work at engaging with God with our hearts, our emotions, rather than just our heads. I suspect that the 'normal' order of service, commonly called the 'hymn prayer sandwich' doesn't actually help us in engaging the emotions. I think a block of music actually helps with that and so we're going to move towards having that much more often. However, it is about that balance of Spirit and truth.

We know it pleases God when we pray together because that's what he commands.

We know it pleases God when we sing and praise together, because that's what he commands.

We know it pleases God when we read his word publicly and hear it taught, because that's what he commands.

However, as we pray, sing, preach and learn together we need to do so not just in truth, but in Spirit, responding to the Spirit's promptings.

Hebrews 10:24-25 *And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds,* ²⁵ *not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* It's very difficult to spur one another on if we're not actually meeting together regularly. And it's not about coming for what you can get. It's about coming to respond to the grace and mercy of God.

Romans 12:1 *Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship.* Our act of worship is also giving ourselves entirely to God. It's a living sacrifice. Growing in worship has to do with loving God with our whole heart, mind, spirit and body. It includes our daily desire to walk with

God, worshipping him in prayer and bible reading. It includes our desire to be God's agent for good, working in his name wherever we go.

Second, we need to grow in our **WITNESS**. Now, I'm not going to say that every one of us should be out on the street preaching. Our reading is clear that there are different gifts given to the church: Ephesians 4:11 *So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, ¹² to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up....* There are some people who have the specific gift of evangelism and I think they have a specific role to play. I think the evangelist builds on the work that others have done and is able to communicate the gospel particularly clearly and effectively. That proclamation bears fruit because of the work already done by others. The others are you and me! That's not a get out clause though. We all still need to witness but I think we can do that in quiet ways by building relationships with others that God can use to bring them to Christ. The role of the leader is to equip the people of God and that's what I've been trying to do.

One person can't do that for a whole congregation but you can for a few people. Jesus had a best friend, John, and then he had Peter and James as well. After that came the 12, then the 72 and then the rest. John, Peter and James got most of his time but they went on to be significant figures in the early church. Jesus taught them how to lead, and do what he had done. That's what discipleship is. That's what we're trying to do with Path of Renewal – we're learning how to be disciples.

Evangelism is a lifestyle, not a process or a model. Look at Paul's instruction to the Colossians: *Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.* Colossians 4:5-6

Effective witnessing involves people wisely using their interactions with others, injecting Christ into their conversation when possible.

One of the most (evangelism pic) common objections to speaking to other people is that we don't know enough. We don't have all the answers. Who like the person who knows everything? We all need to learn and stop making excuses. Babies need to learn to walk – they don't just get up and walk: process. So, we need to learn how to talk to people about our faith. We'll never have all the answers and it's perfectly ok to say, "I don't know."

The reality is that in the West few people find Jesus on their own, most need help. The NT tells of 40 specific healing miracles: of this 34 were brought to

Jesus, or he was taken to them. In only 6 of the 40 did the sufferer find their own way to Jesus.

How can you learn more? Get along to the next Alpha course. Or we can do one specially to focus on answering questions if anyone is interested. Read some books. Ask friends the questions you want answers to and work out if the answer is good. If it's not, try again. Keep asking. Pray – ask God to help you know what to say.

God wants to reach people and he wants to do it through you and me.

Finally, from worship and witness I want to think about **WORK**. Just in case you're thinking, "Here we go again, asking us to volunteer for even more things." I'm not really thinking of this as specific jobs within the church, although it is important that as many people as possible get involved in the life and work of the congregation. We also need to get away from the idea that it's somehow wrong to volunteer for things. As leaders we can help with that by developing stronger relationships within the congregation and also by ensuring that training, help and support is available to anyone who does step up. Also remembering that a job doesn't necessarily have to be done by the same person for the next 20 years. Sometimes we're just so glad to get someone, because we can tick that thing off our to do list.

We are very fortunate to have so many people actively involved in what we do as a congregation.

Ephesians 4: ¹⁶ *From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.* Note, the church grows as, 'each part does its work'.

Earlier in Ephesians Paul declared "*For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.*" (Eph 2:10). So, the 'work' I want you to do this week is to ask God, "What are the 'good works' I was created to do?" I don't know whether it's because we're Scots, or Presbyterian, or if it's something to do with not being given opportunities or taking opportunities to grow, but so many people sit in pews across Scotland saying, "Oh no, not me. I could never do that." In one sense, if that's you, you're in good company. Moses, Jonah, Gideon and a host of others said the same. Oh, but what do you also know about them – they all ended up doing the very thing God asked them to do!

So, what is it that God has created you to do? It doesn't have to be dramatic. Can you use your interest in knitting, photography, baking, computers, model railway, film watching, running, extreme ironing to talk to someone about Jesus? Are you aware of a specific call that God has given you? Has there been something on your mind and you've not followed it up yet, either because you're not sure how to go about it, or because you're not even sure it's from God? Talk to me, or your elder, or a friend about it. We're here to support and encourage.

The work I was thinking of is growing as a follower of Jesus. It doesn't just happen, it takes work. Nobody but you can do it. Just as a child has to learn how to walk by going through stages, we grow in faith by taking steps of faith. We need to learn to spend time with God every day and to trust that when he asks us to do something he will be with us. I often ask people to do things they don't want to do – the Path of Renewal group are taking responsibility for the Gatherings this year. Actually, it would be really great if more people would come to support them as they do that. We originally set it up as a bridge between Messy Church and Sunday morning but it didn't really work out that way. It is really an opportunity for friendship, fellowship and worship. It is also an opportunity for members of the group to learn about leading others in worship. Most of the group are very uncomfortable about it, but I'm pretty sure they'll be praying about it and thinking about readings to go with the topic etc. I'm also sure they'll feel great when it's over, not just with a sense of relief that it's over, but because We need to take steps of faith and often that involves doing something we're unsure of. If we are confident we trust in ourselves and our own abilities, we're not depending on God.

So, if we individually grow in our worship, witness and work I believe that God will use us to build his kingdom. I've given you a copy of a poem which sets out something of my dream for this congregation. Some of you will have seen it before, but for some of you it will be the first time. I first read it around 35 years ago and it caught my imagination then, and still does. I want to be part of a church that loves to worship together, in spirit and truth, where the bible is honoured and taught, where prayer is valued and practised, and where Holy Spirit is at work. A place where miracles happen and lives are changed, where people are welcomed and included and our community is transformed by our presence. We may not be there yet, but we're on the way – so will you join with me and commit to grow in worship, witness and work and let's see the amazing things God has in store for us.