

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

8th January 2017

Luke 3:1-22

Spirit of belonging... spirit of life... find in us... the gift we are... to be what you will us to be... beyond what we are now... always renewed... called... and redeemed... So be it... Amen...

I'm starting a new campaign for Christmas... and I know Christmas isn't a word anyone wants to hear right now... but given the experience of this year... I'm going to campaign for Christmas to be on a Sunday every year...

What a difference it made to have the whole climax over a weekend... and then an entire week before any of us did anything again at New Year...

It meant a heady rush into Christmas day... but then a decent amount of time to enjoy it all... to relax into the good news... and do some incarnational things such as visit people... catch up on *Call the Midwife* and *Strictly*... and spend time with people...

Talking of people... one thing that was noticeable again this year... was the *number* of people who came to the services over Christmas weekend... who weren't regular members... Quite a few people spoke to me and thought at least half who attended... weren't members... and it certainly felt like that...

This is good news... not because it is the first flush of revival... somehow I doubt that... nor that church remains relevant... though I think church becomes very relevant at appropriate times in people's lives...

What it does mean perhaps is that people knew a place where they belonged... This year again... many families... different branches returning from wherever they now live... much more noticeable now-a-days as families are far more widespread... This became a place... where together it was a place to belong together...

As example of a larger reality at the moment... where we are losing touch with things to belong to... We are less able to identify ourselves through jobs... residence... community... family... for they are less certain... less longterm...

We have lost the deeper... more traditional sense of belonging to things... We pass through... we fleet from one thing to another... we don't join anything... ask your local golf club or bowling club or BB company... Gone are the days of waiting lists... where we did things en masse...

Perhaps a symptom of that is our angst with Europe... or who we are in the world now... Independence... Brexit... what does it mean to belong as a country now... where our traditional parties... and political systems don't offer a sense of identity and belonging anymore...

In response to this western paradigm shift... we can offer... baptism... which at first mention... perhaps feels a rather weak and insipid disappointment in such a significant debate... Given the major changes going on in the west... and the crisis of identity... and questions of belonging... and all the unknown consequences of the choices we have been making in that search... baptism is rather an anticlimax... as a response to some serious questions about what it means to belong in the world...

But let's just pause there... and reflect on what it is we do as a church through baptism... for in truth it is a hugely important... if not unique way for us to respond to the search for identity... and more so respond to that sense of a lack of belonging our age feels...

Our tradition in the Church of Scotland... as with most mainline denominations... is the tendency to bring infants to be baptised... far more than older children or adults... The whole thing is set up for infant baptism... with a font rather than a baptistry... with far more hymns about infants than adults... and language of sponsorship and godparents and parental vows...

Because of this... we ask parents... or grandparents... to take vows on behalf of the infant... asking them to promise to make their home a Christian home and to bring their child or grandchild up in the faith of the church...

It all sounds very much like a membership ritual... by proxy... and maybe it is... Indeed baptism and confirmation are actually the same service... but as some point in history... have been split apart...

But if Baptism is a sacrament... a gift of grace... it doesn't depend on any vow we take... by ourselves or on behalf of anyone... If it is a sacrament... then the action is simply between God... and the child... so we could say 'no' to the vow... and it wouldn't change a thing... The congregation is invited to stand in affirmation of the vow... But we could refuse... and the baptism will still stand... It is a sign... and only a sign... There is no magic... it doesn't get you into heaven... it is a symbol of grace... and belonging to God... that God has already offered from the first moment of life...

Thus we use the style of service here designed by David Hamilton... a previous minister... where the baptism comes first... then the vows... which do not affect this gift of grace or symbol of belonging... we have no responsibility there... other than to offer it...

So there is something happening here... that is much deeper than a rite of passage... If we are baptising infants... who cannot yet believe... and it doesn't depend on the vows we make... do we not therefore emphasise a model of church... that says we belong... long before we believe?...

Is it not Good News that the first thing we give to people as a church... indeed as soon as we possibly can... is the gift of belonging... not believing...

We all belong first... The model of church we have is that people grow into believing... We don't seek knowledge or understanding first... We don't say you have to believe in God before you belong to God... or you have to join us first before we are willing to share the gifts of God with you... first we want you to know you belong... Now come and grow with us... hopefully with us... for we long for you to believe also... but we can't give you belief... You can watch us... journey with us... ask all the questions we ask... realise none of us believe everything anyway... You can journey with us into believe... but that's your choice... the only thing you can be certain of is the only thing we can give you... as our gift... and perhaps particularly today... one of the most valuable gifts you can have... belonging...

By welcoming all who bring children to be baptised... we take a chance on people... Sometimes it happens that they come to believe too... but many don't (not in the way we

have institutionalised it)... but that's the chance we take in loving people... by saying 'you belong' here before anything else...

Believing comes later... Belonging comes first... and perhaps that takes more grace as well as pain... more love and disappointment... than is comfortable for us...

But when the west has lost its identity... and its sense of belonging to communities... here the church offers that very belonging... without caveats... a faith... that always keeps the door open... and the water pouring...

So to see almost 1000 people over Christmas in this place... possibly half of them not members... is perhaps a sign that offering the gift of belonging is as important now as ever it has been...

It may come as good news... that when all the traditional relationships we have had... locally, nationally and globally are all critical... that we still offer a relationship that says... in a world that seems ever more desperate to find a sense of belonging again... you belong here... within the love of God... The belief will come later...