

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

16th July 2017

John 21: 15-30

Spirit... come and reshape us... always evolving... renewing... transforming... who we are yet to become... losing nothing of what has been... and inspiring what is yet to be... Amen

Among all the strange stories that make the news these days... from possible Russian scandals... to the natural history museums new star attraction... via the 10,000 piece lego model of a Scottish broch... You may have seen the story... of the elephant... who decided to go for a swim... but ended up 10 miles off the coast of Sri Lanka... having been swept out by currents...

Now... elephants are apparently very good swimmers... but I doubt this lonely individual was expecting to swim a marathon... and was thankfully spotted by a passing ship... who in turn summoned the Sri Lankan navy... who then guided the elephant... the 10 miles back to shore... and now seems to be doing just fine...

It is such a surreal image... that there just has to be some metaphor in it for us... this normally sociable animal... spilt off from its family group... trying to survive in a hostile environment... caught up in a current... and needing a whole army... or navy of people... to bring it home...

Now I don't know if it is a picture of the church... a bit lost at sea... or individuals who imagine they can go it alone... or even our culture being swept along by currents and forces that end up taking us way beyond where we thought we were going...

But unfortunately I couldn't think of a seamless link between elephants at sea... and Jesus asking Peter to feed his sheep... so lets just leave the elephant safely on the beach... and come back to him later... and make our way to different beach where there have never been elephants... but where Peter is facing Jesus' questions...

Peter has denied three times... and Jesus asks him if he loves him three times... and as Peter replies... Yes, I love you... Jesus responds... feed my sheep... Perhaps a metaphor that is counter to the swimming elephant...

You see... it's the moment Peter is brought back into community... He's done all he could do... to split himself off from the circle of Jesus after his denial... He couldn't do an awful lot worse...

But here's the moment Jesus brings him back... "Do you love me?"... "Yes, I love you."... Jesus isn't scrutinising his membership credentials... or checking if he has brought the whole organisation into disrepute...

"Do you love me?"... "Lord, you know that I love you."... Jesus doesn't need to lay it all out for him... and check he confesses appropriately... or responds with the right amount of penance... though Peter can probably feel deep in his soul the pain...

"Do you love me?"... "How many times do you need to ask... Yes, Lord... I love you"...

Who knows when Peter realised Jesus wasn't testing... but reinstating him... back into the community... by enabling him to affirm faithfully the same number of times he denied Jesus... With each affirmation Jesus is drawing Peter back into a community which accepts him for who he is...

"Then feed my sheep" ... Go and do something about it... The purpose of faith is not a confession... or affirmation of what you believe... The purpose of faith begins when that affirmation is played out... when the community... when the hungry... when the sheep... are fed... justice... peace... forgivenesses...

Peter is back... he belongs again... and he has purpose again... But there is more to it than that...

One of the greatest dangers to democracy and therefore freedom... is individualism... This is the finding of a French social scientist 150 years ago... Alexis de Tocqueville... who wanted to explore why while in France Religion had power... but no influence... in America... Religion had no power as it wasn't linked to the state... but had huge influence...

What he discovered was that people created community around needs... and acted together for the common good... When we grow more individualistic... people care more about self... and leave society to care for others... I pay my taxes... let the state look after you...

What he found was that Americans then... quickly responded to problems in their lives by forming local groups... Religion... led people to work together... to solve local problems themselves without leaving them to government...

In the past... you saw a great growth in charities... but now-a-days... more play ten-pin bowling than ever before... yet fewer join clubs or leagues to play it... because we are becoming more individualistic... We're more and more like that elephant 10 miles out in the Indian Ocean... Our social capital is reducing... the investment we make as a community... in each other... is falling... We don't make so many networks now for support...

But... But... what has been found recently... is that there is still a place where people do gather round community need and respond for the common good... Frequent church goers... are more likely to give money... volunteer... spend time with others... offer a seat to a stranger in a bus... are more active citizens... are more likely to turn up... and offer leadership...

Indeed the best predictor of altruism and empathy... is not race... gender... income... or education... The best indicator of generosity towards others... is church going... so much so that it doesn't matter what you believe... the difference is simply turning up to go to church... There is something about the character of relationships formed that teaches people about neighbourliness and citizenship...

Even atheists... who come to church... perhaps a spouse who doesn't believe... coming along with their partner who does... is more likely to volunteer... or give to charity... than a Christian who prays alone...

The influence of the relationships we create here... is the most powerful way of building a community... It is always about relationships...

Do you love me... feed my lambs...

There is the gospel for Peter on that beach... and for us too... as we contemplate our future... as we are always doing as a congregation... It is always about relationships...

And what we have found this last year... after consulting with our community is what was found by Tocqueville... that where we have our greatest influence... is when we create community together... responding to need... in relationship with others... and over the next while... the congregation will be thinking more about that... and rethinking how we share these relationships further into our community... acting together with others... to reshape a fairer... more balanced... generous community...

The elephant in the room... or the elephant in the water is... people think religion is narrow... personalised... and in too many instances it has become that... but religion is actually at its most influential when we create community... the character and style of our relationships... is apparently the best means to grow citizenship and neighbourliness... which is the kingdom of God... and counteracts individualism and privatisation... which is not...

Others imagine the influence of the church stops at... Do you love me... as if a positive and personal response to Jesus' question is what it takes to be a faithful follower... But right in this epilogue of the whole story of Jesus... it says... faith is the antidote to individualism... of going it alone... swimming out there 10 miles from anywhere...

The Kingdom of God is local... made up of the work we do ourselves... made up of the relationships we build in responding to peoples needs... The gospel is all about relationships... "Do you love me?"... "Yes we do"... "Feed my lambs"...

References

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