

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2021

This past week the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland has been meeting online for the second year due to the Pandemic, so that has meant that, instead of the normal 700 or so Commissioners from congregations throughout Scotland being present in the Assembly Hall on the Mound in Edinburgh, only a handful of representatives have been there in person, along with the new Moderator, Lord James Wallace of Tankerness and Her Majesty's Lord High Commissioner, Prince William, the Duke of Strathearn. Everyone else has had to take part in the debates and discussions via Zoom!

Though I am not a Commissioner this year, I have taken time to peruse some of the Reports that were presented, and it is so clear to all of us who love the Kirk, that the Church of our fathers and forebears is very much at present, "a church in transition." Cataclysmic changes are taking place in the life of our national Church and we will witness the impact of them on churches and parishes throughout Scotland in the next few years. Of course, we have been only too aware for a number of years now that the situation with which the Church has been faced has brought us a whole host of problems and difficulties which previous generations would never have dreamt of – less than 3% of the 50,000 babies born in Scotland are baptised; the mammoth decline in the number of communicant members; the amount of church buildings which are requiring vast amounts spent on them; the falling numbers of candidates for the fulltime Ministry; at the end of March we had 685 ministers in post, 151 locums, 299 vacant congregations, and 36 congregations under the guardianship of Presbyteries.

And now the chickens have come home to roost.

"We are at breaking point," stated one Report.

The plain fact of the matter is that the Kirk cannot afford to carry and pay for all these vacancies. They are draining the resources of the Church. And by 2025, the national Church will only be able to afford 600 full time Ministers of Word and Sacrament, along with 60 vacancies. At the present time, 40% of ministers are over the age of 60 and it is likely that 60% of ministers could retire in the next ten years.

The Report of the General Trustees (who are responsible for all our buildings and estates) makes it quite clear that some buildings may never reopen after the Covid crisis is over, and there will no going back to "normal". "The future is going to be very different". The Convener said, "... the Church has too many buildings, too many of poor quality and too many that do not offer a welcoming face to those outside the Church. And they are not all in the right place. So we need to prune and plant....".

I personally have been deeply saddened to see wonderful buildings like the Kirk of St Nicholas in Aberdeen, the "Mither Kirk" of the granite city, being closed and the congregation being dissolved last December; and the lovely historic cathedral in Brechin having to shut its doors after hundreds of years of worship and witness. That situation is mirrored in communities the length and breadth of our land. Church buildings sold to be turned into flats, storage facilities, pubs, apartments.

And it upsets me more than words can every fully express. “Why, Fraser?” you may ask, “it is only stone and lime. The Church is the people of God.” Yes, that is very true, but I will never, will never, be reconciled to the closure of churches, for those sanctuaries are the spiritual homes to the very people of God.

To every believer, like you and me, it is not just a building; it is not even like your own home. Every church is the most precious thing in the whole world. It is washed with the believer’s tears down through the years; with the tears of men and women who once sat in the pews in days gone by. To every church, folk have brought their loftiest feelings at the most tender times in their lives; within that holy space, they were carried as babies in their mothers’ arms; within those walls, they found faith and were inspired to live for Jesus; there, they said a loving earthly farewell as dear ones were carried to their eternal rest.

Each time I see a church that is closed, I have often felt that all that God has done in that particular place, in the lives of His people, is desecrated, and that we have stamped on the holy.

O, I know that there will be many who disagree with me, those who advocate “the church without walls”, and I respect their opinions, but I have often advocated in our own Presbytery of Ayr in years past that we should try to retain church buildings as much as we can, linking them, even in our towns, for, at the end of the day, folk would much rather have their own church and share a Minister! And as far as the upkeep is concerned, where there is a will, there is a way!

You may be thinking that I have lost the plot, but I am convinced that amalgamating Presbyteries (next year the Presbytery of Ayr is uniting with the Presbyteries of Irvine and Kilmarnock, Ardrossan, Wigtown and Stranraer, Annandale and Eskdale and Dumfries and Kirkcudbright to become the new Presbytery of South West Scotland!); introducing guitars and screens and praise bands; joining congregations; reorganising committee structures at 121 George Street are all relatively pointless. Let’s face it – rearranging the position of the seriously ill patient on the bed doesn’t cause them to get better!

Where there is no vision, the people perish! The church perishes!

We have the promise of our Lord Himself that the “gates of hell will never prevail against the Church.”.

So, until the Church learns to listen to what the Spirit is saying, we will not find revival, new life.

New light and renewed life can come when we get serious about mission (have you ever asked a neighbour to come with you on a Sunday morning?); when we give sacrificially instead of just throwing a tenner in the plate every few weeks; when worship becomes a number one priority and not just when we “feel” like it; when preachers offer Christ from the pulpit each Sunday morning and not some dry as dust thoughts, and actually spend time in getting to know and love their people; when prayer is central in our services and in our private lives.

Long ago, John Knox, cried, “Give me Scotland, or I die!”

Yes, revival can come if we earnestly desire it and pray for it. There are living and growing congregations throughout Scotland, thriving and witnessing to their communities – it is not all decline!

So, take heart, dear Friends of St Nicholas! The future's bright – with Jesus!

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister