Advent 2. 091118

St Peter’s

This is one of my favourite Sundays in the year of the church. The scripture readings are full of movement – ‘See I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me’ – we read in Malachi. Paul exhorts the Philippians – ‘that their love my overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight’. John the Baptist steps onto the stage full of prophetic passion and ‘proclaiming a baptism of repentence for the forgiveness of sins’

We are called to prepare, to grow, to share, to proclaim – not to settle for what we have or to identify faithfulness with staying in the same place. The church is to be a dynamic community – not just one which sees faithfulness as guarding and protecting what it has.

My intention today is to say something about the church – in particular this church – and about growth and decline.

The first and most obvious thing to say is that decline is endemic in historic institutional churches like the Scottish Episcopal Church. Peter Brierley’s 2016 Scottish Churches Census recorded that 7.2% of the Scottish population regularly attends church – down from 17% in 1984. That is in part a commentary on our society. What it doesn’t show is that some churches grow and others decline – so that the final figure is an amalgam of the two. Second, we have to recognise that, while numbers matter, faith matters more. The Archbishop of Canterbury recently said this to clergy who might worry about numbers, ‘Numbers are really important but they are not the test of your holiness or of your validity as a priest. They are important because our job is to lead people to Christ.’

In my 42 years of ministry, I have learned that there is no single template or route map which tells you how to make churches grow. But I have learned how easy it is for churches just to melt away. Decline is insidious and it is also deniable – because it happens little by little as people drift away or move away or die and aren’t replaced. We seem to find it more difficult than in the past to share our faith with the generations which come after us. There is no single reason for these losses and therefore no easy or obvious way of preventing them. The demographic reality is that as churches shrink, they grow older. As they begin to grow, they become younger. And there is one more uncomfortable reality. They say that people do not vote for political parties which are split. Nor I am afraid do they join or stay in churches which have internal conflict.

I said that there is no single route map for growth. But I have discovered that a church doesn’t go anywhere very much unless it has some kind of narrative – a bit like the people of Israel heading for the promised land – we need to develop and share with one another a positive and hopeful story about where we have come from and where we are going, about our hopes and fears, about God’s dealing with us. The narrative belongs to everybody – and everybody clergy and people alike shares in creating and re-creating it.

I hear other narratives here. Most obviously one of hurt, anger and blame about what has happened here. I also hear a sad narrative about how we are growing fewer and older – unable to do what we once did. I hear a slightly defensive narrative about tradition and how it needs to be guarded.

Those narratives are part of us – but we need to move on and begin to prepare for a new chapter of faith and life under the leadership of a new Rector. The new narratives will be about our faith, our prayer, our service, our joy, our hope. They will also say something about the changing community in which we live – how we shall reach out to it, serve it and involve it. And there will be something about the opportunity which we have in welcoming international students into our church family. Our narratives will speak of our worship – indeed there will be a constant dialogue between congregation, choir and clergy about how we shape worship which expresses our faith as a community and presents an attractive God to those who seek him – as one of my friends said recently, strive to develop worship which helps people to touch the heel of God. I hope to work with groups of people in shaping some of these narratives after Christmas.

A narrative is not a policy – it carries a vision and it is full of hope. It reminds us that’s God’s hopes for us are greater than our own hopes for ourselves. It is a story which we tell – and because God is part of the story indeed God is the heart of the story, it can become the means by which God shapes and renews us and our community.