Central Fife Group Service 300815

James 1: 17-27 Mark 7: 1-8, 14-15, 21-23

I’m glad to be with you today to share in this service of all of the member congregations of the Central Fife Group. We’ll be meeting again shortly for the licensing service for Ian here on Thursday 17 September – and after that for Margaret’s Ordination to the Priesthood in the Cathedral on Sunday 15 November.

Those are really important moments and they tell us something. The movement of call and response - which is the work of the Spirit – is enabling us to put in place people who will exercise ministry in each of the churches of the group. That means Margaret in St Finnians, Gerry in St Lukes and Ian here in St Margaret’s, Leven – with Fr Gareth and Ian here whose ministry we value greatly. They have a ministry of word and sacrament, a ministry of faithful care and of missional leadership. They offer some security and consistency to each of the congregations. And the memory which I carried away from my meeting with the three Vestries some time ago was a real sense of positivity about the future, an apparent lack of anxiety and a willingness to explore something new.

For the gospel always calls us to do more.

The readings today aren’t about how we sustain congregations or groups of congregations. They aren’t about care of buildings or the accounts or your relationship with the diocese – all of which are important. What they are about is integrity of faith. The reading from James contains those well-known words, ‘Be doers of the word and not merely hearers who deceive themselves’ James in today’s words is telling us that we have to walk the walk and not just talk the talk. The people who are the centre of their own world – who peek in the mirror and have to keep coming back to have another look – aren’t rooted in anything solid. But those who measure their lives against the perfect law, the freedom of God, will be blessed because they are measuring themselves against what is other than and more than themselves.

And Jesus criticises the Scribes and Pharisees for living only by the tradition – honouring with their lips but not their hearts. And he reminds us – rather scarily I think – that what corrodes or pollutes the spiritual well-being of a person comes from within and not from without. The fears and the resentments, the anger, blaming and resentment, arise from within and not from without. And yet of course everything which makes us unhappy is always somebody else’s fault.

So how does this relate to the future of the Central Fife Group?

Well it reminds us first of all that the objective is spiritual vitality and not institutional survival. It is to build communities of disciples rather than members of an organisation. It is to live by God’s perfect law rather than to protect what we have.

I’ve sometimes said that we need something to help us to move to the next level – and that’s why we are in tentative consultation with the Church Army. They have 29 mission projects across Britain – one of them at St Luke’s on the edge of Dundee. Those projects are about building up the church and leading it into missional engagement with the community in which it is set. I brought the Archbishop of Canterbury to visit it when he was here in October. The Church Army is keen to work with the Scottish Episcopal Church and they recognise that Fife – not the Fife of the golf courses of St Andrews – but the Fife of the past industrial history of Scotland – is the kind of place where they want to be. Alison and I have a strong relationship with Mark Russell, the Chief Executive who happens to come from Portadown, and I am honoured to have been invited to address their national board when it meets in Edinburgh on Friday week. So we have built a close connection.

What I mean by moving to the next level is this. You are all making real progress – you can see it in each of the congregations. You can see it in the new confidence and new members in St Finnians; in a congregation like St Lukes which has the courage to take the pews out and where people want to learn about their faith; and here in the worship and all sorts of initiatives like the knitting group. We want to do more – to get to the next level. We need more people. We need to build disciples. We need to have the energy to get out into the community.

There is always more – and we have been exploring partnership as one of the ways of growing. You will have heard about that in the All Souls Church Graft in the former ABI Group where we are in partnership with P’s & G’s in Edinburgh. I hope we can find a partnership for here.

It is easy for the church to retreat to leafy suburbs and grouse moors. You have been an inspiration to all of us in the way you have sustained your life and grown in faith.