

SERMON: Sunday – 20 November 2022 – Rev Alistair Cowper

To bring Christ to people and to bring people to Christ

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Luke 1:68-79

It was the writer, Clarence Jordan, who in a letter written in 1967 said, “I really don’t think we can ever renew the church until we stop thinking of it as an institution and start thinking of it as a movement.”

55 years on, that statement rings true and in a letter last week from the Church of Scotland’s Assembly trustees, there was a comment made that the reason that the church is in such a crisis of change at the moment is because we have avoided making change for 50 years.

“The pain of change is the result of not having tackled enough of the serious issues we have faced and have articulated for 50 years. We are at this point of transition and change and experimentation because what we currently do is no longer working.”

I’ll come on to what they suggest we do in a moment.

Michael Curry is the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church and is passionate about the church rediscovering itself as a movement of Jesus:

As he says, “Jesus did not establish an institution, though institutions can serve his cause. He did not organise a political party, though his teachings have a profound impact on politics. Jesus did not even found a religion. No, Jesus began a movement, fuelled by his Spirit, a movement whose purpose was and is to change the face of the earth from the nightmare it often is into the dream that God intends. . . . there really is a movement of God in the world”.

In his book, *Following the Way of Jesus*, Michael Curry highlights three marks of that early movement:

It was Christ-centred - the Way

It abolished poverty and hunger in their community sharing everything they had

It was a counter cultural community where Jews and Gentiles had equal standing

Part of that was touched on by the trustees of the GA in their newsletter I referred to a moment ago, when they said, “the Church exists for nothing else but to bring Christ to people and to bring people to Christ”.

Few would argue that that’s what we’re all about but we will perhaps all have different ways of interpreting what that ‘bringing” of Christ, and the bringing to Christ, looks like.

Some of us, will feel strongly that the church, our church, need be involved in abolishing poverty and hunger in our community; through supporting ministries that seek to do this like the warm hub and through supporting other things like the food bank, Reuse and Thrive, and the like.

Some will feel strongly that the bringing of Christ to people will be in the very acts of service that these ministries afford. And indeed many will do this in the hope that the bringing of people to Christ will also happen as a result of seeing Christ presented to them in such a way of service.

This is our God, the Servant-king.

And I’d want to commend even the smallest act of service that I know you all do already.

And sometimes there will be the bringing of Christ to people in more direct ways, through Word and Sacrament, in worship, through prayer, through a word of wisdom or knowledge or simply through the Wind of the Spirit blowing where he/she/it chooses to blow.

When the church is thought of as a movement more than an institution then there is perhaps more of a recognition that it is the Spirit who leads us in this organic, fluid, ever changing dance of love which is the Way of Christ.

Many accept that this Sunday is the last Sunday of the Christian calendar. The new liturgical year begins with the First Sunday of Advent and the season of preparation for the coming of God’s Salvation into all the world. And so this last Sunday of the year is known by many as the Reign of Christ Sunday. Next week it’s the promise of Jesus the baby as the story begins and this week it’s the endpoint of story and the reign of God in Christ which Jesus life and death was all about. As if to emphasize that Christ the King is not like the rulers of this world, the other Gospel reading chosen for this Sunday is Luke 23 when Jesus is crucified alongside the two thieves.

This is our God, the Servant-King, the God whose kingship appears to end with death on a cross but instead, is miraculously raised by God to reign in glory forever.

It's a way of Jesus saying, this is how much God loves you, so go and love like that and you will find peace and life everlasting.

I said I'd mention what the assembly trustees suggest be the necessary new direction of the church moving into the future. They suggest that:

"We need to invest in new mission and ministry initiatives, including training and education, at the same time eradicating our deficits. And that means letting things go. As Assembly Trustees we have agreed that the top priority is indeed about making disciples and renewing and growing the Church."

Whilst letting go is never easy, it's heartening to hear in those words, the call back to Christ-centredness for the whole Church to turn our attention to what matters. And that's not to say that we haven't been endeavouring to do just that, for we have. It's just good to remind ourselves regularly of what is important.

When Zechariah saw that it was indeed true that his wife Elizabeth was going to have a baby just as the anghel had said, his tongue was loosened and he shouted out that song of praise to God which we read earlier.

And you, my child, will be ...
A prophet of the Most High
A preparer of the Way
An announcer that the light is coming
And with it peace to our paths
And further down the line,
A ministry of reconciliation for all.

At Advent and Christmas, we remember that God intends to bring something new and great when he births these things into being in a new day for humanity.

And in order for this new humanity in Christ to grow, some old ways need to move aside and make way for the new.

So much of Scripture is about God making things new or doing a new thing:

The prophet Isaiah speaks of God doing a new thing, something fresh springing forth, so that there will be good news for the poor, recovery of sight for the blind, freedom for the incarcerated and oppressed.
(Because oppression of the poor is one of the hallmarks of the old humanity.)

The prophet imagines a promised time when weapons are recycled into farm equipment because nobody studies war any more.
(Because war is one of the hallmarks of the old humanity.)

(Isaiah 43:19, 61:1, 2:4)

Ezekiel speaks of a new heart, a heart of flesh that replaces the heart of stone.

(Because the hardening of hearts in the name of self-interest and in-group interest is a hallmark of the old humanity.)

(Ezekiel 11:19)

Amos foresees a time when a river of justice rolls down from the heights, filling the lowest places first.

(Because a concentration of power and wealth at the top is a hallmark of the old humanity.)

(Amos 5:24)

Micah tells us that what matters is doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly before God.

(Because hoarding power, loving money, and walking in racial, religious, or national pride are hallmarks of the old humanity.) . . .

As we prepare to enter another Advent season, let's watch and listen for the ongoing birth of the new movement that encompasses all things. The movement spoken of, and lived out, by prophets and Jesus and Paul and others, and maybe even by us, together, here in KNEC.

Let's keep Christ at the centre of Christmas as we trust the Spirit to bring Christ to people and to bring people to Christ.