

Alastair MacDonald's Licensing at Inch

Saturday 15 June 2013

Genesis 12:1-9
Philippians 2:1-11
Luke 19:1-10

My dear friends it is the task of the preacher on occasions such as this to share some reflections on one or more of the bible passages we have just heard and then see how it might apply to yourselves; both to Alastair in particular and to his two new congregations.

I do this with relish for three reasons at least. First of all because one of the lessons chosen was from Paul's letter to the Philippians. It is one of my favourite in the New Testament. It speaks of unity. Unity between Christians and unity with Christ. This theme drives me, and drives me again.

Secondly I feel I have come to know both congregations well, both in their potential for the future and their fruits they have already nursed forward.

And thirdly, it gives me the opportunity to say something directly to Alastair by way of my bishop's charge to him.

Taking these in turn, then. Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul, the writer of the letter, is casting around for images of unity that he can share with a church that clearly is not at peace with itself. We know from elsewhere in the letter that two of the church leaders at Philippi have been scrapping it out over something. We don't know what it was because Paul, unlike newspaper writers of today, doesn't dwell on what is negative and he doesn't tell tales. But we can infer that their disagreement wasn't pretty. What's more it was affecting the unity and growth of the local church.

When this happens waves of disaffection spread far and wide. When one part of the body suffers everything else suffers as well.

What Paul does is to remind the believers in Philippi of the unity they have in Christ. This is what bonds them together. No one should lord it over the other. Each should carefully look to the other person as greater than themselves.

Have nothing to do with partisanship and what he calls 'vain ambition'. Tenderness and pity, touchstones based on the life of Christ, should be the things that are the hallmarks of your church and of your faithful discipleship.

Jesus did not count himself above those around him; he stripped off his cloak and, in the manner of the slave, washed the feet of those around him, and willingly – even if not gladly – accepted the utter humility and degradation of the cross. Such was the model of his mission and ministry.

It is for this reason that he was then exalted by God to the highest place in heaven for having shown us the way of Christian service here, he then shows us the way of glory to the Father.

My contact with each of the two congregations has been different. At Woodhead I have found a tiny congregation in a huge church building that is genuinely at peace with itself. There is a sense of cared-for well-being within an ordered framework that works through mutual loyalty and respect.

For the first time in many, many years you will soon have your own priest in charge, shared with just one other congregation. But you have also your own independence as a congregation, and this for the first time in I can't think how long.

I have great hopes for you. Maybe not tomorrow, for tomorrow is too soon. But a little further down the road something by way of a *new* joy will begin to find its way into your life as a congregation.

This new joy will in turn give way to a renewed hope that sooner than we all dare to think, growth in numbers as well as growth in depth of faith and commitment will come to be your lived experience.

At Inch, I remember my first vestry meeting with you. There were no minutes of the previous meeting because the previous meeting had been more than thirty five years previous. Likewise the AGM minutes. There had been no AGM in living memory.

The constitution was over a hundred years old and out of date beyond description. You have come a long way since then. It's not been an easy road at times, and sometimes the pace of travel along it put end-product before interpersonal process in a way that was at times, let me say it for we are all grown up and can say these things, hurtful.

Perhaps a few bible studies on Philippians might not have gone amiss.

But you are where you are and it is a good place to be. I salute you in every way for it. Your appointment of Alastair and your linking with Woodhead of Fyvie are giving great hope beyond yourselves to the wider diocese.

You have appointed a priest who will be seeking to grow you as a congregation, the two of you as congregations, and we pray adding a third and entirely new congregation of people committed to the way of God's discipleship.

Very few priests are currently able to do this. It requires particular skills and gifts. In Alastair you have such a priest.

He knows what a growing congregation is like. He's worked in more than one. He needs to be given his head by you all whilst at the same time recognizing himself that he needs to keep his feet on the ground.

Alastair, in spite of his sublimely gentle almost demur demeanour, is the ecclesiastical, missiological, theological equivalent of a front row forward.

Alastair use this missionary and evangelistic gifting to every advantage that God gives you but also develop and practise from the heart of Christ the gentle, nuanced and delicate gift of discipling diplomacy. It will win hearts and minds.

Balance the nerve and verve of the switching and swerving athlete with the differently but no less effective energetic art of the pastorally creative aesthete.

Win trust. Gain others' confidence. Generate enthusiasm. Deepen everyone's desire for the things of God. Show what it means to be Christ-like.

By such means you will be surprised, or perhaps you won't be surprised, to see a full line of others running with you towards the goal which Christ has set before you.

This will be good. Very good. From it, our celebration today will give way to further rejoicing not just tomorrow, but the day after tomorrow as well.

May you all indeed be blessed.

Amen.

†Robert Gillies
Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney