

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Sermon for Sunday 5th June 2016

Reading: Luke 7:11–17 (NRSV)

Reflection

This passage of scripture would be a hard one for me to engage with at the best of times. At the drop of a hat I can preach on Jesus' parables, his teachings, but the miracles always cause much head-scratching.

I don't rule out the miraculous, but I do have doubts, and I do not believe that the fundamental laws of nature have altered through history. How the universe, how the human body functions now, has to be the way it functioned a hundred years ago, two thousand, from the dawn of time and until the universe implodes or explodes at the end of time.

Jesus may well have brought the widow's son back to life, but how he did it I do not know. I understand that at the time there were other people who performed miracles, so this was part of how life was understood then, but for the life of me I cannot draw a parallel between this and the miracles performed by the NHS day-in and day-out that I'd be willing to preach.

So failing that I could draw out the social justice message within it. Women were classed as property at this time and the widow would have been destitute with no man to care for her. Jesus' compassion and willingness to change the situation is a powerful message.

Related to that is Jesus' lack of concern for the social niceties of his day. Touching the dead was thought to make you ritually unclean, but Jesus didn't worry about this and just acted for the greater good.

I could have also gone with the closing verses and spoken about how we should seek to be Christ-like so that by our actions people will glorify God and be drawn into relationship.

I could have headed off down these trains of thought, but this image of death and resurrection just kept bouncing off other things that are going on.

Before I share my troubles just let me put an idea before you to put it in a context.

In our reading we have a widow who is leading her dead son out to be buried. If we pause there we are faced with desolation, grief, and an unknown future. Then Jesus appears, and we have potential, anticipation, and the introduction of hope. The man is then restored to life and our story ends with joy, renewal and gratitude. For us to know there is a happy ending, we have to get to the end of the story.

This is why stories are great, they tend to always have a beginning, middle and an end. The same is true for an individual life, but for all of Life we can only guess as to what counts as beginning, middle or end. There are plenty of folk that will get over-excited about us living in the end times, but we may well be only getting to the end of the beginning.

My point is we don't always know in each moment whether we are at a beginning, middle or end stage. We don't know this for sure, but we do tend to make assumptions and base our decisions upon them.

The stage we think we are at will affect the decisions we make.

If we feel we are at a beginning, we can be all hopeful and enthusiastic and rush headlong into things. If we feel we are in the middle, we can be cautious and patient and make a sensible decision. If we feel we are at an end, we can be resigned and abrupt and put off any decisions.

So my point is that our perspectives can affect the decisions we make. This can be positive or negative, but we need to be aware of them.

When it comes to making decisions as groups, as well as talking about the actual decision, we also need to reflect on our perspectives. If the majority of us are convinced, and are all over excited about a new beginning, then we can safely take a leap of faith. If when we reflect upon it we are sure we are at an end, then we need to focus on contingencies and succession plans rather than unfocussed activity.

So, what are the things that have had me distracted from sermon writing by our theme of death and resurrection?

In the wider world is the report that those who understand themselves as agnostic now outnumber those that claim the name of Christian. So a general sense of the decline of Christianity which is never a good feeling for church-goers and especially for those of us who've taken it up professionally.

You could argue that there is a positive in it that there are still 40 odd percent of the nation who call themselves Christian, which is still much greater than the seven or eight percent who actually do something about it and attend Church regularly. But whatever the statistics the decline of Christianity in Britain continues – which it has been doing for the last few centuries (please note I said centuries, not decades. It's been felt for a long time; we just haven't come up with an effective response to it yet.)

A little closer to home we have the deployment, or future patterns of ministry, discussions within the Synod. The news that in five years' time in the North Western Synod we'll go from 40 or so ministers to 30, and even fewer after then.

You thought going from one minister to sharing with another congregation was a difference, the maths is going to get so much more complicated. We've had a Synod meeting about it, a ministers' gathering, the roadshows for elders over the next few months, Area meetings in September and then Synod again in October. And by then we may have some short-term proposals.

Then to top off this three-some we have the new URC logo! I'd heard tell there were moves to have a new logo and I enquired about it as we were intending to have the logo etched on our new front doors. I was assured that it was a minor tweak

So we have moved from **this** to **this** (ppt slides with logos)

Can you spot the difference?

Whether you like it or hate it, is beside the point. The more troubling issue for me is why?

I think the initial reason was something about image formats, but the new one we're told seeks to 'reflect a church that is vibrant and dynamic.' Fair enough, but my concern is how does this relate to the United Reformed Church? Feels more aspirational than actual.

As a denomination we have been in decline since before we formed forty-four years ago. We have produced successive reports about how we need to restructure ourselves to better cope with too

many buildings and too few folk with the resources, time and energy to move our focus from maintenance to mission, but we have ignored them.

We are now at the point where the proverbial is already making contact with the spinning draft-maker hitting the fan, and we are still blithely going on as if we have all the time in the world.

The URC was born in the ecumenical enthusiasm of the 1970's and that kept up our spirits for quite a while. We definitely had a beginning, even if that was probably the middle for Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Churches of Christ.

What is troubling me is that as a denomination we seem to still have the mind-set that we are at the beginning stage, when we probably moved on from there twenty years ago. If we are at the middle, or perhaps even at the end, we need to acknowledge that perspective and start acting accordingly. We were born as a movement seeking to unite the churches of Britain and we've drifted into being just another denomination.

I am hopeful that we may not be at the end of the URC, linking back to our reading, we may not be at the point of death with no hope of resurrection; but I do believe if we are to have a new beginning we need a radical approach to prepare the ground.

Just a quick aside. I'm finally reading the copy of a book I gave Shirley when she was inducted to serve as an elder last year – *Leaving Alexandria: a memoir of faith and doubt*, by Richard Holloway who was the Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh. I'd like to share a quote from it where he reflects on his time as a bishop and missed opportunities:

The Church wastes its substance in prolonged meetings to discuss and refine and endlessly reorganise itself, the mark of institutions in crisis throughout history. p.282

As a denomination, Synods and local churches we need to act now as the we can't be sure how many tomorrows we can put things off too.

We need a radical approach that assumes the worst which can then either prepare us for a good death or be the springboard for the Spirit to move amongst us.

The argument I have made is that each congregation needs to be self-sufficient, and if that proves to be a struggle then the wider URC needs to support them to explore ways of becoming so, and if that is unachievable begin exploring union with another URC, another tradition, or accompanying them on the journey to closure.

The wider URC will probably keep on talking and writing reports, but the good news is that any solution that has a fighting chance of succeeding will be one that is dreamed up and decided upon locally.

The main question I believe our elders and members need to reflect upon is whether we can be self-sufficient?

If we can't what do we need to work on to become so, and if it is not going to be achievable where should we look to find common cause to ensure our contribution to the living, declaring and celebrating the Kingdom of God continues? And maybe finding common cause would be a good thing in and of itself and worth exploring anyway?

I could carry on and share my personal frustrations with the workings of the Synod, the implications of being a minister of four or many more congregations, and being a minister with over twenty years to go until retirement looking at what is coming, but I'll save that for another time.

My short-term hope is that this sermon will purge me of the image of death and resurrection that has perplexed me all week, and I can merrily get on the train to Edinburgh this afternoon for a week's holiday and leave it behind.

My long-term hope is to have planted the idea of this congregation exploring ways of becoming self-sufficient so that we can flourish whatever the future holds.

So I'll end with Jesus' attitude and wish as we look to the future: have compassion and do not weep. **Amen**