

PENWORTHAM UNITED REFORMED CHURCH

Sermon for Sunday 5th February 2017

Readings: Matthew 5:13–20 (NRSV) Psalm 112:1–9 (NRSV)

Sermon

This morning we started our worship slightly differently. The elders had spent some time reflecting on how we should begin our time together given that one implication of our choir's retirement is that we don't have a very obvious cue for folk to stand anymore as worship begins. There was also the feeling that it would be good to have a time of silence as we start to give us all time to prepare for worship. I hope that you have found our initial attempt useful, and of course we can tweak and adjust as we go.

This was a tiny change in the order of things. Tiny changes happen all the time, some we notice, others surprise us when they are pointed out weeks later, but change is constant.

At our last joint elders' meeting, where our elders met with those from Leyland, Fulwood and Kirkham, we discussed some suggestions from the Worship Team. The Worship Team being the worship groups, lay preachers, retired ministers from the four churches, and myself.

The Worship team suggested that the elders discuss some ideas they had come up with in regard to lessening the burden on those involved in leading worship. The numbers of folk willing to lead services is decreasing, those that are willing are all getting older, and the stipendiary ministers we do have are being spread thinner and thinner. The thought was that if we can make some changes we can make organising and delivering worship more straightforward and sustainable.

Of course, the suggestions vary in the amount of change involved. Some would be tiny and others major, which was clear in how the different elders meeting reacted and how they will be approached.

The first suggestion was that months with a 5th Sunday, those services could be planned a month or so in advance by one person or Worship Group, but then locally led. So, one person or group would put in all the effort to prepare a service and then three other people or groups would have something they could deliver or tweak as they so desired. So, for 5 or so Sundays each year roughly the same service would be shared in each congregation, members of the Worship Team would take it in turns to prepare, and each congregation would implement it when they could. So, no changing existing plans, but down the road that would become part of our initial service planning as a group. I hope you agree that this is in the minor change category, as truth be told you'd only know because I've mentioned it. All the elders' meetings thought this was a useful idea so I'll be putting together a service of the 30th July which will be offered to the other three congregations as well.

The second suggestion was the possibility of sharing a pre-recorded video sermon. Some worship groups are daunted by the main talky-bit within a service. They're perfectly happy to choose hymns, offer prayers and talk to the children, but sermons are scary. The Worship Team had thought about sharing a live feed, but that would be incredibly complicated. So instead one person prepares and records the message, and then each congregation could play it on their screen. Now there was some dis-satisfaction with this, and it isn't a perfect solution, but we are looking at compromises to make the best of the situation we find ourselves in. Given that, each of the elders' meetings agreed to give it a try as a one off and see what we think afterwards. When the Worship Team meet next week, we'll explore how we go about this.

The third suggestion was that instead of our bi-annual joint services being in the afternoon we have a joint morning service twice per year. So, three congregations would travel to join with the fourth, and we'd rotate around. The hope was to increase attendance, build fellowship, accepting that it would slightly compromise our local witness (but only twice per year) and we'd need to look at offering

transport to our members. Again, each of the elders' meetings agreed to give it a try as a one off and we'll be looking at a date in October for us all to go to Leyland.

The fourth suggestion does fall in the major category and is to trial different service times to allow one worship leader to take 2 services. Both Fulwood and Kirkham decided to not proceed with this, and Leyland and our own elders thought it was worth exploring further. So, our, and Leyland elders will consider this further. Initially separately, then possibly together, and potentially with a joint proposal going to each church meeting for decision. This suggestion may not go anywhere, but possibly a recommendation will come to our church meeting to trial, probably for three months, altering our service times. It would mean a change in our habits, but it would nigh on remove the pressure on finding leaders of worship as it would mean I would be here the vast majority of weeks. The main benefit for me would be with you every week rather than alternate, and if you did go into vacancy there is the possibility of persuading other leaders of worship to pull a double shift and plan our pulpit supply jointly.

So, some tweaks, and some things we are going to probably try. Hopefully you will agree that this is an ordered and open way of proceeding, especially in comparison to some of the rash and destructive decisions being made elsewhere on our planet.

So how does my updating you on a meeting relate to our Bible readings?

Our reading from Matthew continues on from last week's. After Jesus declares the attitudes we should have to be blessing to others, and to be blessed by God, he declares us salt and light. Salt and light change things, and they change things in partnership with other things. Salt brings out the taste in a meal, and light shows us what is there. It is by being salt and light that we live out the spirit of God's commandments, that we behave righteously and foster justice and peace. And we have all of those sentiments reflected also in the words of the psalm.

We are called to be change-makers. Not change for changes sake, but so that God's kingdom may be revealed. We are called to live striving to be in harmony with each other, in solidarity with the excluded, and discerning where God is encouraging us to go.

If salt isn't used it becomes useless. If light is hidden, darkness remains. We are called to action, to live out the Beatitudes, and to be salt and light for the sake of others, and for the sake of God.

In my sermon, last week, I made the case that the Beatitudes are an act of teaching and that we are supposed to learn something from them. They are not something nice to hear, or eternal reassurance, they are a lesson. They are not about future reward, they are about the here and now, and a challenge to emulate them. So, in this light let me offer a retelling of the Beatitudes:

When God feels furthest away, is when intimacy with God can come instantly.

When your heart is broken into a million pieces, is when others are most likely to embrace us and we are the least likely to refuse.

When we are most aware of who we truly are, is when we are fully aware of the beauty and wonder of the world around us.

When we give all that we are to do the right thing, is when our achievements give the greatest affirmation.

When we see the pain in the eyes of a person who has wronged us, is when we feel fully human.

When we have received forgiveness, escaped distraction, know ourselves and place ourselves before the ground of our being, is when we are closest to God.

When we seek to calm troubled waters, help others to communicate, refuse to respond in kind, is when we are acting most like God's children.

When we are living God's kingdom and the world seeks to compromise, confront, or confound us, is when we are being the most Christ-like.

In all things, rejoice and be glad, for God is within, around, and beyond all that is.

The Beatitudes are a call to be blessings to others, to be salt and light.

They are an invitation to see the world as it is, but to live as if God's Kingdom exists in the here and now.

They are a challenge to come alongside others on their journeys, be responsible for your own, and be open to see the glory of God within it all.

They are how we live as salt and light and offer discernment and vision to the world around us.

In all things, rejoice and be glad, for God is within, around, and beyond all that is. **Amen**