

There is only one constant - and that's change: Recent changes in the life of the parish

This Sunday, 26th July, we will read the parable of the yeast. Jesus tells us the Kingdom is like yeast. One aspect of yeast is that it's a living organism. It is living and dynamic, changing and transforming. God's church as well as the Kingdom is dynamic for ever adapting to changing circumstances and new revelations about God's word.

You'll remember, one of the last meetings Jesus had with the disciples. The disciples had been fishing all night on Lake Galilee, they had caught nothing. In order to catch some fish they needed to change what they were doing. Jesus could see that. He was on the shore preparing a fish breakfast. He shouts to those in the boat, "Cast your net on the other side". They do, and they haul in a great catch. (You can read about that in John 21.)

A couple of weeks ago the Session met via Zoom to hear about and consider a number of changes that we face locally and nationally at the present time.

Up-date COVID-19 unlocking

You may have seen in the news that churches are now permitted, although not required, to open for worship. However, this is not as straightforward as simply opening the door. Singing in worship remains prohibited, worshippers must keep a social distance and so buildings need to be appropriately signed, and no one is permitted in galleries as their presence can have an aerosol effect on those below. That should give us an indication that the threat of COVID-19 remains very present.

Those churches which do open their doors will need to follow detailed and rigorous protocols. These include, ensuring that:

- Hand washing facilities are available to use.
- Alcohol-based hand gels must be readily available
- Appropriate signage is in place
- Physical distancing (2 metres) can be observed.

The church must be cleaned before and after each time the building opened.

A risk assessment must be undertaken.

No building can be opened without permission from Presbytery which must be satisfied that all protocols have been followed.

We are also advised that no one over the age of 70 should be involved in the initial cleaning of the church building.

We keep abreast of the situation, but at the present time, with recognition that many of our congregation are in high risk categories, Session believe it will be some considerable time before our buildings re-open for worship.

I believe that the restrictions on our gathering for worship provide us with opportunities to explore and develop our individual life of prayer and praise. I pray that we will each be open to the Spirit's

guidance and that at some point in the future we might be able to share with one another what we have found helpful and a blessing.

Officer Bearers standing down

Our Session received the resignation of our Session Clerk, Lindsay Cortés, who will be stepping away from the position as of 31st July 2020. She is standing down as an Elder and as Treasurer of the Guild at the same time. She became Session Clerk in the middle of the last vacancy and, among many of the tasks she has undertaken, led us through our change of constitution a couple of years ago. I am grateful to Lindsay for putting the Sunday Service onto the website over these past weeks of lockdown. I am glad that she is happy to continue to do this so that everyone can access the service.

Ruth Stannett, had privately let me know long before lock down that she wanted to stand down as Treasurer after 25 years. She was first treasurer at Chapel of Garioch and then the united parish of Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch. She brought the accounts for Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch together when the union was formed over ten years ago. She is also standing down as a serving Elder from the end of this month.

Trevor Stannett is also to stand down as a serving Elder at the end of the month.

The Session thanked Lindsay, Ruth and Trevor for their commitment, dedication, and service to God's Kingdom through the parish here in Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch over many years..

As a consequence we now seek a new Session Clerk, a Treasurer and a Gift Aid Convener. If you feel God may be calling you to undertake any of these roles I will be very pleased to hear from you. None of these offices need be filled by Elders. So, I would be glad to hear from anyone who feels God has given them minute taking or bookkeeping skills to use in the service of the Kingdom.

The Session also heard that after 24 years as our organist at Chapel of Garioch Aileen Ross has decided it is time to stop. Session thanked Aileen for her contributing greatly to our worship in Chapel of Garioch both at the keyboard and her prayerful musical choices. We do now have an electronic hymnal but if anyone has keyboard skills I would be pleased to hear from them too, even if they were not able to commit to every Sunday.

I offer you this prayer to use, which we used at the Session meeting.

Loving God we thank you that you gift us by your Holy Spirit to perform the tasks required to enable effective mission and ministry through your church. We thank you for Lindsay and her work as Session Clerk. We thank you for the quiet and efficient way she has gone about that task. We thank you for Ruth keeping an accurate and efficient record of our financial affairs and keeping us within the financial regulations of the Church.

We thank you for Lindsay, Ruth and Trevor's work as Elders. They have contributed in many ways and we thank you for their commitment and dedication.

We thank you for Aileen's selfless and unfailing commitment to provide music for our worship in Chapel of Garioch.

We have appreciated the gifts you have given each of them to use in your name. We ask your blessing upon them.

Help us to meet the challenges that we now face as we seek to fill the roles they have left. Help each of us to search our hearts and discern our gifts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Martyn and Diana

Next March I will celebrate my 65th birthday. At the start of this year I had thought I might retire in December and had a conversation about retiring with the Rev Ian Groves, who had recently retired from the West Kirk.

Given that there will be changes as parishes group together and Presbytery enlarges (see below) it seemed the right time to retire. Please be assured that whilst we all have our thoughts about these changes I do think the parish groupings are a sensible way forward. In many ways I wish I was ten years younger to help bed-in the new models of mission and ministry that will be required in future. Clearly, what we do within the new structures, whatever they turn out to be, will need to be different to what we have done in the past, otherwise we'll still be fishing over the same side of the boat!

Also, Diana's parents are in their 90s and live in the middle of rural Wiltshire, not the easiest place to access from Chapel of Garioch by any means of transport.

As you will have read above, I am not anticipating our being able to safely gather together for worship in our buildings for some time. My visiting role as pastor is also going to be restricted for some considerable time. Sitting at the computer isn't the most life-giving exercise.

So, Diana and I have decided that I should retire now. My last Sunday will be 23rd August. I expect that will be a service sent to you via our website, just as we've been doing over the past weeks. However, there will be one final service posted on the website for Sunday 30th August.

An interim moderator will be appointed. As I write this, no appointment has yet been made.

Nevertheless, I've not stopped just yet. I will continue to be writing services for a little while, as well as conducting funerals. I will write more reflecting on the past five years in due course.

Diana has been responsible for sending cards on the anniversary of baptisms and Christmas cards & books to those we have baptised. She tells me that she has enjoyed it very much and has not found it an onerous task. Once a year she prepares all the postings for the year ahead and then makes diary notes, so they are sent at the right time. If you think that's a task you might take on please let me know. I do believe it is very important that we do all we can to keep in contact with those who have been baptised or brought their children for baptism, and that we support them, particularly at the beginning of their lives with Jesus.

Up-date on Presbytery Planning

So, there are a number of changes happening at the moment. We need to try to discern what God is telling us and what is his will for the future.

You will be aware that prior to 'lockdown' parishes across the Presbytery were being encouraged to have conversations with their neighbours with the intention of creating groups of parishes that would work more co-operatively and fruitfully together. This will be essential as the number of ministers appointed within the Presbytery falls. We know that Presbytery needs to reduce the number of ministers from around 25 to 15.

We had some valuable conversations with Inch-Lesley-Oyne-Premnay and with Culsalmond and Rayne with Daviot. Sadly, but understandably, those conversations went on hold for several weeks. There have recently been further conversations amongst the Ministers, but the situation remains largely unchanged.

A new Presbytery Plan had been anticipated for the June meeting of Presbytery. Clearly, that has not been possible, and Presbytery has not met. Consequently, the suspension of the old plan was extended to the end of January 2021 when a new Plan is scheduled to come to Presbytery. The implication of this is that parishes will not be able to proceed with any new vacancy until a new Plan is agreed. The new Plan will set out how it is intended to reduce the number of ministers appointed to the Presbytery.

Plans to create a larger Presbytery of the North East, including Orkney and Shetland continue.

All this deserves, indeed, demands, our prayers. We need to listen carefully to what God is telling us and particularly to where he is guiding us. We need to open our eyes to see the vision he has for us, both as a parish and as the Church of Scotland. Our experience of change here in Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch is similarly patterned in most other parishes in the country.

The story of God and his people is one of death and resurrection. There was a beautiful and perfect garden called Eden from which God's people were rejected because of their disobedience. There was restoration but then the great flood came. Noah and his family survived, and Abraham was called to found a great nation. That nation was taken into bondage and slavery in Egypt, but God chose Moses to lead his people to freedom and the Promised Land.

We must remember that the Israelite nation was taken into exile in Babylon, but that a remnant of the faithful survived and were eventually able to return to the land God had given them and they rebuilt the Temple. Jesus embodies the idea of death and renewal, resurrection and new life with God. From small beginnings as tiny as a mustard seed the Kingdom grows. A wee baby born in the straw with a feeding trough for a bed brought the Good News of salvation into the world and Christ's Kingdom began to grow.

Time and again God has shown how he will use the faithful few in their weakness and helplessness, in their grief and despair and transforms his faithful people bringing restoration and new life. Are we the remnant of God's faithful people today? We pray for renewal, looking forward with faith and hope.

May God continue to walk life's journey with you and bless you.

Martyn