

A few days ago there was a knock at the door. Lindsay and Ruth came bearing gifts from the parish and local community. Thank you all so much for your very generous gift and your good wishes as Diana and I set out on retirement. Thank you for the quaich which will be a very fitting reminder of the friendship we've shared in Blairdaff and Chapel of Garioch over these past few years.

I am so very sorry that we are not able to meet together to say cheerio to one another.

We leave the Manse on Monday so you may see a large van in the driveway.

God called us to this part of the world despite our not knowing anyone here, but we soon did, and it has been a great joy. Thank you for letting me into your homes to share your challenges, your joys and sorrows. It is always a huge privilege and honour to be invited to share in a person's life and to be a channel of God's love. I do hope I have been that for you.

I thank God for the opportunities he has given us to explore together his word as recorded in the scriptures. Over these past few years, among the many themes, we have revisited the story of the Exodus, events in Holy Week and Jesus' resurrection appearances. Through our Bible Studies, which we called "A preparation for Easter" (or similar), we've read through The Gospel According to Mark, Paul's letters to the Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians, reflected on the nature and work of the Holy Spirit, the meaning and importance of Jesus birth, and on the nature and practice of prayer. You will recall that wonderful Pentecost Sunday a couple of years ago when about sixteen people stood up in Chapel Kirk to recite the Lord's Prayer each in a different language. We've re-enacted Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem with our own journey, albeit only from the village hall to Chapel Kirk, but we did have a pony! I also recall that wonderful Songs of Praise service in Blairdaff Kirk when a few of our church family stepped forward to tell us why a particular hymn meant so much to them. I was hoping we might repeat that this year but events have overtaken us.

I thank God for all of you using the gift the Holy Spirit has given each of you to contribute to the life of God's Kingdom in this parish. You may have made cups of tea and coffee, organised a Christmas Fair, sold items at the Plant Sale, or helped with a Quiz Night. You may have bought some fair trade items from Chapeltraid, our important reminder of the need to treat people in our commercial activities with dignity, respect and fairness. Thank you if you were one to provide music or assist with prayers or contributed to the Good News we shared with one another during Sunday worship. Please continue to ask yourselves, "where am I seeing God at work in my life and in the wider world today?".

I have particularly enjoyed the Study Group conversations, ably led by Aileen Ross. That has been a refreshment to me week by week.

There are too many to mention all who have done so much, but I do want to say 'thank you' to the Elders and to Lindsay, our Session Clerk who is now taking a break, and to all the office bearers. Thank you all for your work, advice and guidance and all your contributions to the life of the parish.

So, the page has turned and this chapter has come to an end, but there are more pages in the book. God will continue to write the story of his encounter with his creation and the people he has made in his image. How that story unfolds we don't quite know. When God called Abraham, Moses, Peter and Paul none of them knew quite what that meant, but they stepped out in faith. Whatever the future holds for us as a church or for us as individuals we can be certain that God loves us and walks life's journey with us and, that through faith in Jesus, he has made provision for us when our earthly life is over.

The story God is writing here in Scotland is likely be a story where his people work more collaboratively with neighbours across parish boundaries. Exactly how the story unfolds will depend on how we respond to God's call and how we use his gifts. Like the stories of Abraham, Moses, Peter and Paul it'll be exciting to be part of the story which, with God, is always a story of hope and resurrection. God brought his people out of the dark time of bondage in Egypt into the Promised Land. He brought his people out of exile in Babylon and they rebuilt the Temple. When all seemed lost with Jesus' death on the cross, God raised him to new life.

Jesus gave us many parables about the Kingdom being like a growing seed. My prayer has always been that you, and I, indeed the whole church, will grow – grow in our understanding of God's word, grow in our prayer life, and grow in our relationship with God. I pray, too, that we will love God with all our heart soul mind and strength. If we truly love him, we will demonstrate this by being active in rising to the challenge to be fishers of men and women, and to make disciples of all people. That will enable us to fulfil the command to love our neighbour, for the greatest love we can show others is to introduce them to Jesus so they can develop their own relationship with him and know the blessings of being a child of God.

So, may the Lord, bless you and keep you and make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

Martyn.