

Worship 3rd January 2021

Aberlour Parish Church

Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Intimations:

Happy New Year

From Andrew, the minister:

We're all entering 2021 feeling differently: some of us will be mourning, others reflective, others wistful, others hopeful. While we enter 2021 with different emotions, we all go into it having shared the experience of the difficulties and challenges that a pandemic brought into our lives. If there is a chance that this communal experience, albeit horrible communal experience, gives us the chance to move into the future where we are kinder and more understanding of each other and each other's needs then we should grasp it with both hands. I wish you a peaceful and blessed new year, for yourself and those you love.

Buildings closed 10th and 17th January

In light of the recent escalation in Covid-19 restrictions to Level 4, and acknowledging the rising numbers locally and nationally, the decision has been taken not to hold in-person Sunday worship services in the church building on the 10th and 17th January. We'll continue to monitor the situation going forward.

In the meantime, video services will continue to be uploaded to the Church Website, Facebook and YouTube, and paper copies will be available to those who wish them.

Call to worship

God of all seasons:

As the shepherds and angels gathered at the stable to worship the baby

As the boy went with his folk to gather at the temple for Passover

As we normally would gather ourselves this Christmas season, and wishing each other well this new year

Your people have gathered to worship together in all manner of times and places,
and while we continue to mourn the distance that separates us physically
we ask your Spirit to be among us and unite us in worship spiritually.

Let us worship God,

At the turning of the year – looking back on pain and drudgery, and looking forward in expectation and hope we sing of the God who is with us in all times, seasons and years: Lord for the year – your love has kept and guided

Hymn: *Lord for the Years*

1 Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided,
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

2 Lord, for that word, the word of life which fires us,
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us,
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.

3 Lord, for our land, in this our generation,
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care;
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

4 Lord, for our world; when we disown and doubt him,
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain;
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him,
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

5 Lord, for ourselves; in living power remake us,
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne;
past put behind us, for the future take us,
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Timothy Dudley-Smith

CCLI Licence No. 649173

Reading

Of all the four gospels, only Luke has the following episode: Jesus the boy in the temple. As a story it functions as a bridge between the infant baby messiah and the adult teacher Jesus of Nazareth. It sits between the 'before' and the 'what comes next.' It's a well-loved passage because it shows a relatable slightly mischievous side of Jesus, as well as being relatable to anyone whose known the feeling as a child of reaching up for a hand that wasn't there because you've become lost from your parents; or of parents in that gut wrenching moment when you realise, just for a moment, that you don't know where your child is.

Reading Luke 2:41-52

⁴¹ Now every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. ⁴² And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. ⁴³ When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. ⁴⁴ Assuming that he was in the group of travellers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. ⁴⁶ After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. ⁴⁷ And all who heard him were amazed at his

understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” ⁴⁹ He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he said to them. ⁵¹ Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

⁵² And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.

Reflection - part 1

Three thoughts.

The first is from a memory of mine from a primary school assembly at this time of year, when I was around 7 or 8. The headteacher got up in front of the school whole and told us about the Roman god Janus who had two faces looking in opposite directions, the Roman god who gives the name to January. The headteacher’s point was that at this time of year we often look back on what’s been and we look forward on the year to come: a natural tendency as we bridge the time between the ‘before’ and the ‘after’. Perhaps this year that tendency is more acute than ever. There’s a communal experience that everyone has been through in the last year, with the sense of treading water, of being locked down, of waiting, with plenty to be getting on in the meantime but directed towards... well just keeping on keeping on. All the while we’ve been waiting for a time when things will be better again and now we think we might be glimpsing it. Although a new strain means that the virus is spreading more quickly than ever, we also have two vaccines that are being rolled out with the promise that life might get back some time this year to being something closer to what we remember. At New Year there is a looking back and there is a looking forward.

The second thought is that there’s a sense of exactly that looking back/looking forward in the life of Jesus in our reading today. This wee story sits between the manger in Bethlehem and the teaching, healing son of God that is an adult about 30 years later. We’ve already said that only one gospel writer fills that gap and Luke does it only with these short verses. It’s significant in the story that Jesus is twelve years old - just short of the age, 13, when his time and tradition would treat him as a man come of age. Jesus here is certainly no longer infant but not yet man, and this story has us - as readers - looking both back and forward. Looking back, we question how it can be that despite all the miracles and signs we heard of in his birth, Jesus’ parents Mary and Joseph haven’t realised what it means when Jesus says “I should be in my Father’s house.” Looking forward, we think of the times to come that we’re going to see Jesus in the temple with the teachers and the scribes – not this time listening and asking questions, attracting amazement and approval: but in dispute and rebuke, attracting scorn, anger and plots for his death.

Looking back and looking forward, we can ask how much did the boy Jesus know of his ‘before’ and his ‘after’? Was this time in the temple his own attempt at getting ready for the life that was before him? In films with a hero-figure you often get this montage of them getting ready for accepting their destiny: in the Rocky films you’ve got the oft-copied scenes him running up and down the steps, training with the punching bag, while ‘*Eye of the Tiger*’ plays in the background. Is that what this story is about? Jesus getting ready serving his apprenticeship for the ministry that lies before him?

Possibly. But I also think it is reasonable to ask what child ever knows very much about what their adulthood is going to be like. What 12 year old - for all their longing to grow up, for all their desire to be treated as an adult- can really imagine what actually lies before them when they're 30?

So I wonder if it's better to imagine that this moment in Luke's gospel is less about a boy getting ready for his adult ministry and more about the boy who was simply at an age and stage where he was fascinated with the temple: fascinated with a people who studied and discussed the laws of God and who were working out how to live in good relationship with God and what that meant. Not preparation *per se*, but a fitting way for that boy Jesus to be simply living as he felt led at that time and at that moment - even if it might get him into trouble with his parents afterwards!

Third thought. Given that we've talked about the new year and looking back and forwards; given that we've seen Jesus caught in this moment between what has been and will come; I wonder for us, in this new year, what we are meant to do? As we look back and we look forward - with all the regrets and nostalgia that looking back comes with, and with all the hopes and fears and desires and anxiety that looking forward brings - I wonder if we are called to do something similar to the boy Jesus and just be and do as we are led in this moment. Simply to do what we can as Christians in this moment: not necessarily anticipating what's to come, not necessarily doing it in light of what's been - but simply to be as we are now, before God.

Methodists at this time of year often have a service that they call their 'covenant service'. During the first service of the new year, the Methodist tradition will take a promise together in worship. It's a promise which is a covenant set in a form of words that they say together; it reaffirms their faith as they enter into the new year; it's a way to recommit in faith given what's gone before -with all the trials and triumphs of the past- and as a way of committing to the future, not in our own strength but in God's strength.

After our next hymn I'm going to invite you - if you want - to join in making that same covenant a reality for yourself and reaffirm our faith in the way that the tradition of the Methodists lends us.

Hymn – *In the bleak midwinter*

1 In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan,
earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone;
snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow,
in the bleak midwinter, long ago.

2 Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign.
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
the Lord God Almighty, Jesus Christ.

3 Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshiped the beloved with a kiss.

4 What can I give him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

Christina Rossetti

Reflection - part 2

I'd invite you if you want to go and find a candle so that as we do this act of commitment together even if we're on our own at the moment we are all lighting a candle together: a candle that speaks of the flicker of our faith even amidst the trials that we live through.

A word also just about this covenant promise in relation to new year's resolutions:

Often at this time of year we speak of new year's resolutions which involve striving to make ourselves better or not to do something that we know we shouldn't. But what we're about to do is not about resolutions: it is something quite different.

In making a covenant promise we are not striving for something more but surrendering what we have. This isn't a determination to act or be or live better but the letting go of all the things that weigh us down. This isn't self-improvement, but self-surrender. It is not a grasping for more and better from ourselves, it's a letting go and giving to God.

The words I'm inviting us to use as a reaffirmation of faith are serious words. They outline a commitment that lays claim on every part of our lives. The Methodists note on their website that many people find these words tough to say and to really mean them.

Of course, faith doesn't ask us to wait until we're ready and until we feel strong enough and equipped enough to make commitments and affirmation of faith – who can ever be truly ready for the consequences of that commitment? And anyway, that takes us back to the realm of those film montages with the idea that we have to work ourselves up into a position where we're ready strong enough and fit enough for the challenge ahead.

Making a commitment of faith is quite different. In faith we surrender ourselves to God's grace. And it's God's grace that sweeps us up and enables us to say things that sound -in human terms- simply impossible or foolish, but which are said in the trust that with God all things are possible.

Which is to say – it may be you don't feel comfortable affirming your faith with these words, it may be that these words speak of a commitment you don't feel able to make. If so, you should know two things: firstly that no matter, there is space in God's love for you; in fact not just space; but that Jesus tells parables over and over again about God's particular love for those who feel lost, or wandering, or unsure, or not ready, or unworthy, or outsiders. These people are God's priority, these people are God's favourites. Secondly, that you can still light a candle, and give to God all those memories and emotions of the past; and all those hopes and fears of the future.

To those of us who do make the commitment of these words falls the responsibility to live them, and to be a community of God's grace and love in which takes faith so seriously that there truly is space, welcome, and joyful acceptance for anyone and everyone who seeks God's embrace.

Reaffirmation of faith

I am no longer my own but yours.

Put me to what you will,

rank me with whom you will;

put me to doing,

put me to suffering;

let me be employed for you,

or laid aside for you,

exalted for you,

or brought low for you;

let me be full,

let me be empty,
let me have all things,
let me have nothing:
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.
And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours. So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

Methodist Covenant Prayer

Hymn *Great is thy faithfulness*

1 Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father.
There is no shadow of turning with thee.
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not.
As thou hast been thou forever wilt be.

Refrain:

Great is thy faithfulness!
Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see.
All I have needed thy hand hath provided.
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

2 Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest,
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above,
join with all nature in manifold witness
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

3 Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow;
blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!

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Blessing

Go now to love and serve the Lord.

This new year and always,
may the gifts of faith, hope, and love be yours.

And may the blessing of God -ever three and ever one-
be yours. **Amen.**