

Worship 2nd May 2021

Aberlour Parish Church

Rev Andrew Kimmitt

Call to Worship

Holy Risen One,
we gather this day
and we come as we are:
we come from different places,
we share one love.
Accept all we bring before you today.
Accept our worship, we pray

Prayer of Approach, Confession and Lord's Prayer

Creator God,
you made air and water,
shape and movement,
large and small,
fierce and calm,
strong and weak.

You gave your Son
who laughed and wept,
railed and encouraged,
exposed and embraced,
knew joy and pain,
lived and died.

Your Spirit moves
wild and gentle,
solid and fluid,
speaking and silent,
challenging and affirming,
breaking and mending.
Lord, we are inflexible:
we cling to tradition,
we resist change,
we yearn for past securities,
we reject risk,
we are rooted in routine.

Forgive us, Lord,
and help us to let go
of that which makes us

hesitant,
fearful,
reluctant.

May our praise today sing a new song.
May our fellowship find harmony
in your presence.

And may we leave here
holding on to nothing
but your ever-changing,
ever-faithful truth.

In Jesus' name.

Amen

Hymn CH4

- 1 The God of Abraham praise,
 who reigns enthroned above,
 Ancient of everlasting days,
 and God of love.
 Jehovah, Great I AM!
 by earth and heaven confessed,
 I bow, and bless the sacred name
 for ever blest.
- 2 The God of Abraham praise,
 at whose supreme command
 from earth I rise, and seek the joys
 at his right hand.
 I all on earth forsake,
 its wisdom, fame and power,
 and him my only portion make,
 my shield and tower.
- 3 He by himself has sworn,
 I on his oath depend:
 I shall, on eagle's wings upborne,
 to heaven ascend;
 I shall behold his face,
 I shall his power adore
 and sing the wonders of his grace
 for evermore.
- 4 There dwells the Lord our King,
 the Lord our Righteousness,
 triumphant o'er the world and sin,
 the Prince of Peace;
 on Zion's sacred height
 his kingdom he maintains,

and glorious with his saints in light
for ever reigns.

5 The whole triumphant host
give thanks to God on high;
'Hail, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost!'
they ever cry.
Hail, Abraham's God, and mine! —
I join the heavenly praise —
all might and majesty are thine,
through endless days.

Thomas Olivers (1725–1799) (*alt.*)
based on the Jewish *Yigdal*

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Reading – Acts 15:1-18

15 Then certain individuals came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.'² And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to discuss this question with the apostles and the elders.³ So they were sent on their way by the church, and as they passed through both Phoenicia and Samaria, they reported the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the believers.⁴ When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them.⁵ But some believers who belonged to the sect of the Pharisees stood up and said, 'It is necessary for them to be circumcised and ordered to keep the law of Moses.'

6 The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter. **7** After there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, 'My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the Gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers.'⁸ And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us;⁹ and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us.¹⁰ Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?¹¹ On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.'

12 The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. **13** After they finished speaking, James replied, ‘My brothers, listen to me. ¹⁴ Simeon has related how God first looked favourably on the Gentiles, to take from among them a people for his name. ¹⁵ This agrees with the words of the prophets, as it is written,

16 “After this I will return, and I will rebuild the dwelling of David, which has fallen; from its ruins I will rebuild it, and I will set it up,¹⁷ so that all other peoples may seek the Lord— even all the Gentiles over whom my name has been called. Thus says the Lord, who has been making these things ¹⁸ known from long ago.”

Reflection

What makes us who we are? What gives us our identity? You and I – and us as a Church – what makes up our identity?

It’s a big existential question, but it’s one that our reading today takes us the heart of. And it takes us to witness what happens when people who thought they were on the same page discover deep disagreement about the answer to it.

Lots has happened between Philip’s encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch last week, and our reading just now.

For one thing, a man named Saul who, as recently as chapter 9 of Acts was plotting murder against the Jesus-followers, has had his road to Damascus experience. When he did have his conversion the apostles in Jerusalem didn’t trust him – it seemed too big a change too quickly. It was Barnabas who believed Paul, and after a short spell preaching in Jerusalem, they both go to Antioch for a year, where the followers of Jesus – mostly non-Jews, ‘gentiles’, are called ‘Christians’ for the first time.

Meanwhile Peter has undergone a re-conversion of his own. Peter, Jesus’ closest disciple, who had his time with Jesus, he is still learning. He has quandary about a Roman centurion – Cornelius – who invites Peter to eat with him. But the food will not be kosher, unclean and forbidden to Peter by the Jewish laws. Peter has a vision – and ends up going to Cornelius’ place. He is moved to preach to a whole crowd that: “‘I really understand now that to God every person is the same. ³⁵ In every country God accepts anyone who worships him and does what is right.” (Acts 11:34-35)

The parallel tracks of Peter and Paul tell the story in Acts of an even further outward movement to the Gentiles. We've been tracking this movement: first from the Jews in Jerusalem, to the Hellenistic Jews, to the Ethiopian Eunuch; and now, to everyone.

But now Paul and Barnabas are getting into an argument about what that means for these new gentile believers. And up they go to Jerusalem to sort out the issue because there are some saying that these gentiles should be circumcised according to the laws of Moses.

It's not that these Jesus-following Pharisees are against the idea that the Good News is for everyone. They are not small minded and exclusionist in that sense.

It's just – well surely if God made it this way for us Jews all these centuries – surely that is how it ought to be for these new believers too?

It's really difficult to imagine how big a deal this was for them. It does cut right to the heart of their understanding of identity.

You see, when the Pharisees talk of 'circumcision' – they don't just mean the ritual surgery performed on men. When they say 'circumcision' they mean the whole kaboodle of their Jewish identity. They mean their self-understanding as the people God made a covenant with through Abraham – and themselves as the children of that covenant. Circumcision was the mark of that covenant. They mean the whole Law, and their understanding as being the people whom God lead out of slavery from Egypt through Moses, and gave Moses the law as a sign and covenant of being God's people.

For these pharisees, the question isn't about *whether* the gentiles should be a part of God's family – but they show it, and what they understand as the demands placed on a child of God.

The idea that Gentiles might be included in the circle of God's love and care, and do so *without* circumcision and the Law... that is a Big Change, and revolves around centuries of self-understanding, Jewish theology, and identity.

So it's right, when we turn to this passage that we don't belittle the Pharisees' views, or write them off as grumpy and cantankerous spoilsports. It's right to acknowledge that *change is hard*. Especially when what you're asked to change feels like it goes to the core of who you are.

That's still true today. The Church of Scotland, and its local congregations, are not known for their love of change. General Assembly after General Assembly over the last 5, 10, 20, in fact 50 years has talked about the need for radical change in how we understand and how we do church. And there has been some. But we, are for instance, still a long way off the vision of a Church Without Walls that was set up, approved and

had huge congregational buy-in – a mere twenty years ago. I was 10 years old then, and am still waiting to belong to the Church Without Walls I was told about then. One of the reasons I felt called here was it seems to me that Aberlour really does *want* to be a church community that transcends the four walls of the building, and the Sunday 1hr a week service.

Not all resistance to change is about identity, or at least not core aspects of our identity like with these Pharisees. But when change does impinge on sense of identity is when the bitter arguments start. That's when we find out – 'Oh, I thought all along that we were *this* sort of people; but you don't share that, and I can't see that that's right'

The issue comes, when a core aspect of our identity – who we think we are - is used as a barrier for *others* not being able to share with us. The issue comes when our own sense of identity, what we think is right or wrong for our community becomes an 'in or out' issue – where we either exclude others from joining us; or we exclude ourselves, and leave or keep our distance.

Because the church – certainly in terms of human judgement – cannot have 'in or out' markers of identity: When Peter said ““I really understand now that to God every person is the same.” When Peter said “we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.” Peter was saying that no-one can draw in-out line for God.

None of us can do anything to earn God's favour. By God's free grace do we gain salvation, by God's free grace we are made God's children. Anything that seeks to control, or put conditions, or mark out a safe human-approved arena for God's grace to operate in – that is idolatry, as Peter says, that is testing God.

So the pharisees can, and perhaps should continue in their ways, in their inherited forms of ritual observance. Jesus did after all; Peter and Paul prefer to – and a theme throughout Paul's writing is around when to keep the law – especially the law pertaining to food – and when not to. For him the key question is always whether keeping of the law is a stumbling block to new believers.

We each have the things that make us who we are, the markers of our identity. Individually, as a congregation, as church denominations. A strong sense of our own identity is a good thing – it helps us live authentically and with integrity.

But *our* identity can never be allowed to be a stumbling block for others.

So let's be the ones who celebrate our identity, and drawing from it, share the riches and blessings of God's grace.

Hymn CH4 522

- 1 The Church is wherever God's people are praising,
 knowing they're wanted and loved by their Lord.
 The Church is wherever Christ's followers are trying
 to live and to share out the good news of God.

- 2 The Church is wherever God's people are loving,
 where all are forgiven and start once again,
 where all are accepted, whatever their background,
 whatever their past and whatever their pain.

- 3 The Church is wherever God's people are seeking
 to reach out and touch folk wherever they are —
 conveying the Gospel, its joy and its comfort,
 to challenge, refresh, and excite and inspire.

- 4 The Church is wherever God's people are praising,
 knowing we're wanted and loved by our Lord.
 The Church is where we as Christ's followers are trying
 to live and to share out the good news of God.

Carol Rose Ikeler (*b.* 1920)

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Prayers for others and ourselves

There but for the grace of you, Lord,
do we experience so much wrong
in the world around us.
Governments impose restrictions
which penalise the poor.
Power-seekers lay down the law
and the weak suffer.
Warmongers make their own rules
and the innocent pay the price.
Religious leaders abuse your holy word
and love and tolerance are left bleeding.

Loving God,
we pray for a time
when people are set free
from the shackles of greed and selfishness.
When the only rule by which we live

is that of compassion and love.
When the only kingdom worth fighting for
is yours.
Open the eyes of your Church
that she might lead the way to a new way of living
in which all are equally valued:
the language spoken
is one all may understand;
the call to serve
is one on which all may play a part.
And may the liberating, loving and limitless
grace of our Lord Jesus Christ
be with us all.
Amen.

Hymn CH4 739

- 1 The Church's one foundation
 is Jesus Christ her Lord:
 she is his new creation
 by water and the word;
 from heaven he came and sought her
 to be his holy bride;
 with his own blood he bought her,
 and for her life he died.

- 2 Called forth from every nation,
 yet one o'er all the earth,
 her charter of salvation:
 one Lord, one faith, one birth.
 One holy name she blesses,
 and shares one holy food,
 as to one hope she presses,
 with every grace endued.

- 3 In toil and tribulation,
 and tumult of her war,
 she waits the consummation
 of peace for evermore,
 till with the vision glorious
 her longing eyes are blest,
 and the great Church victorious
 shall be the Church at rest.

- 4 Yet she on earth has union
 with God the Three in One,
 and mystical communion
 with those whose rest is won.
 O happy ones and holy!
 Lord, give us grace that we,

like them, the meek and lowly,
on high may dwell with thee.

Samuel John Stone (1839–1900) (*alt.*)

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Sending and blessing

Leave the fear.

Leave the anger.

Leave the hurt.

Leave the pain.

Leave it all.

And go in peace.

May the forgiveness of God,

the teachings of Christ,

and the presence of the Spirit,

bring peace and joy to your hearts,

and praise to your lips,

this day and forever more.