

Planting a Culture of Love

On Easter Sunday 2017, on the most important day in the Christian year, the Brierley Group released the shocking results of the most recent Church census. It revealed that church attendance in Scotland had dropped by 50% in the space of three decades. The statistics for our church, the Church of Scotland, were even more shocking. They revealed that church attendance in the Church of Scotland had dropped by an astounding 40% in the space of only 14 years, crowning the Church of Scotland with the *dubious* accolade of having the steepest rate of decline of any Church in the entire world.

And this decline has given rise to a flurry of frantic activity within our Church. Last year, a Strategic Plan to combat the rot was presented to the General Assembly, only to be rejected amid some unpleasant scenes. This year a new Radical Action Plan will be presented as an alternative, with more money being put forward for mission, and new kinds of ministry being created.

Now given the scale of the problem, it is very tempting, more than ever, to prioritise getting bums on seats. If only we could get more folk to come on a Sunday, if only the Sunday school was bigger, if only we had a youth group, then things would be fine. But our readings today teach us one crucial lesson. That in pioneering new forms of outreach, and reforming our institution, if all we're looking to do is prop up an old culture of church, then we will fail. For the call of God to us today, is not to prop up the old culture of church, but to plant a new culture of love.

Now I am here today because in January of 2017, under the direction of your own Jim Dewar as Moderator of Presbytery, I became the first person to be ordained as a Pioneer Minister in the Church of Scotland, and appointed to be Campus Minister at the University of Edinburgh.

And given how novel the role and terminology of pioneer and campus ministry are, I'm sure more than one of you are wondering what on earth it is I do. Because working with students *might* give the impression that I just spend all my time in the pub. And while it's true that I spent Tuesday night in the pub, and Thursday night, there's more to my job than frequenting the student union, telling people about Jesus, and bothering them until they buy me a drink to go away.

Now the word 'Pioneer' comes from the Latin word for foot – it's where we get 'podiatry' from – and, through French, came to mean a foot soldier. A pioneer, then is like a soldier who goes ahead of the main army to prepare a way for it. A pioneer minister is someone, then, who attempts to create new forms of church in a context where there is little or no faith, forming a 'bridgehead', so to speak, that will allow the larger church to follow on behind.

And in our first reading today, we encounter one of the greatest of all pioneers, Abram. Abram ventured from his home in Ur, and then from his camp at Haran, to cross over into the promised land, into the place that God had sworn to give him and his descendants if he ventured out in faith. Now, it would be easy to think, perhaps, that Abram *hated* his homeland, hated his heritage, and the religious culture he left behind. Why, otherwise, would he go? Yet the text doesn't say that. It says that he ventured out for one, single, reason: *the voice of God*, calling to plant, and build up, the new.

The pioneer goes out not because they *dislike* what has gone before, but because they've been called to prepare a new way. And that's no more true than of myself. I'm not some 'trendy vicar' type. I'm not some hoodie-wearing minister who's 'down with the kids.' Heaven forbid. If I had my way, every church would be like St Giles' on the High Street. I'd begin with having a full choral service with communion every week, but then go even higher, having incense, kneeling, and endless, dizzying processions. That's what I'm into. But that's not where most people are. The unchurched are, I am

sad to say, unlikely to attend conventional worship. It's too remote from what they're used to. They don't know anything about Christianity, or what they do know has been pieced together from media sources that are often hostile. And so what we try and do at the Campus Ministry is do church in a different way; basing it around activities like community gardening or befriending the homeless; changing the location from church sanctuaries to peoples flats or rented halls. And making a conscious effort to go to places, like the pub, where students hang out.

Yet while my role as pioneer is to journey outwith the walls of the church, you may question whether you yourselves have to make that journey. It can seem at times that it's only the pioneer who's *outside the walls*, and that normal folk can continue as its aye been. And literally that is true: you have a number of church buildings in your community, and church services to go to each week. Yet, in reality, *every* Christian is now outside the walls, for whether we sit within the walls of a church or not, *no church* is now safe from closure, and *no church* is safe from union, or linkage, or dissolution, for there are simply not enough Christians to fill them all.

And that means that while, like Abram, the pioneer must go first, *all of us*, in time, will have to make that journey too. The pioneer, like Abram, may plant first, set stone upon stone, and erect the first altar to the living God in an alien, and desolate land, but only so the whole people of God will one day worship there too. And that's scary. And daunting. And we might feel that we don't have the strength, or the desire, or the skill to even know where to start to bring a new way of being and doing church to the Balerno, Currie, and Juniper Green area.

And this is where our second reading comes in, because it addresses the motivation and drive that should move us to explore news ways of doing church, *and* the purpose for doing it. We read at verses 1 and 5 of our passage from Romans: "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand... and his hope does not disappoint us, *for God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*"

Now that phrase 'justified by faith' might seem to have a weird, archaic sound to it. But there is nothing archaic, or dated, or weird about justification: for it is the foundation, and source, and *power*, of the Christian life. And justification means this: that because you are united with Christ, God loves you unconditionally, that your life has value and importance regardless of who you are, what you have, or what you do or don't do, and that he has a special purpose for each of you in the service of his Church. It is this love, this sense of acceptance, and peace even in the midst of the stresses, and horrors of life, that has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

Now let's just get this out in the open before we go any further: it isn't very *Scottish* to talk about this 'love stuff'. It isn't very Scottish to talk about your life having importance and value, and that you have a special destiny in the church. It can all sound a bit self-indulgent, sappy, pathetic, and weak. But it isn't self-indulgent, or sappy, or weak: it is the power of almighty God, the power that you need today to finally love yourself, the power you need to find purpose and hope in life, the power you need to repair the fractured and dead relationships you've left behind. And it's that same power, the power and the glory of divine love, that has to be the motivation, and the goal, of our attempts to be and do church differently.

For while our broadband bandwidth bulges, our bank accounts surge, and our houses and cars get bigger and more luxurious – Scotland is sick. Depression, anxiety, and mental health incidences grow year upon year; people live surrounded by neighbours, but are driven to despair and suicide because of isolation and loneliness; the young self-harm, or grow frantic over not getting enough Facebook likes or the best Instagram shot, while, to cap it all off, nobody even knows from March onward whether there's going to be enough food or medicine to go round.

And while you can point to brain chemistry, and social changes, and a host of other factors, most of that angst, and sadness, and sense of isolation stems from one thing: the lack of love in our society. Because here's the thing: if you don't have God in your life, or if you don't have him in the right way, then you're dependent for your love, and self-esteem, and sense of value and purpose on two very shaky foundations.

And the first, and most common, is the love and approval of other people. How many of you here have got miffed because someone didn't give the recognition you deserved or because they didn't like or comment on your Facebook post? How many feel yourself needy at times, looking for validation from your partner or friends, or always having FOMO – that's fear or missing out – when you see pictures of friends or colleagues enjoying life without you? These are *symptoms* of a lack of love in our lives.

The second way of finding love without God, however, is from yourself, from the *pride* that comes from thinking how great you are. When I'm not in the student union pub I sometimes find myself watching daytime TV. And as all you daytime TV aficionados will know, Loose Women is one of the highlights of the lunching hour. And I remember watching an episode once with the loose women discussing this very issue of liking and loving yourself. And one of the panellists said that every day she gets up, looks in the mirror, and says to herself: "You're wonderful. You're beautiful. You are perfect. You are great' until she believes it.

More recently, some of you may have heard the Robbie Williams' song 'I Love My Life' whose chorus goes, and you can sing along if you want to, I won't mind:

I am powerful
I am beautiful
I am free
I love my life
I am wonderful
I am magical

Now we can all agree that it's important to learn to love yourself. But I can't help but feel that there's something off about literally shouting into a mirror each morning how beautiful you are, or singing songs about how magical you are. That doesn't seem quite right to me.

But this is what people are forced to resort to in a society where they are starved of love. And how some writers have come to think about this struggle, this struggle to find value and purpose for our lives is in terms of *the grief cycle*. The grief cycle begins with you feeling happy and good about yourself because other folk are validating you, or because you can take personal pride in how good or successful you are. Then things start to go wrong. Folk aren't praising you enough; your relationships start to turn sour; that thing you took pride in starts to lose its lustre, or gets taken from you, and you feel worthless, and small, and alone, craving the attention, or recognition, or love, or success that will put you back on top again. But you're only ever on top of the grief cycle, and it's only a matter of time before you're on the bottom of it again.

Contrast this with the grace cycle, the cycle of grace and love and fruitfulness discussed by Paul in our Romans reading. Here, the foundation isn't the love of others or personal pride, but acceptance, the unconditional acceptance of knowing that you are loved and justified by God. It's that unshakable love and faithfulness that forms the foundation for your identity and your value, and from that position of strength, and fullness, you begin, bit by bit, to overflow with love, the love of God overflowing from your life into your relationships, your community, and the whole world.

The world does better entertainment, better counselling, and better community development than we do; it's got better tunes, better fashion, and better technology. But we have one thing that it doesn't have: we the love of God, that has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and which wills to transform our lives and overflow to our neighbours, our friends, and our families.

For if a pioneer was someone whose job it was to plant new churches for the sake of it, to think that the call of God which called Abram was a call to lay out wooden pews, install a pipe organ, and start up a worship service, whose mission it was, not to serve *others*, but to get more people to serve the needs of our failing religious institution, then I would not be a pioneer minister. But that is not what a pioneer is. A pioneer is someone who journeys into the depths of the cycle of grief, raises an altar to the Living God, and proclaims the coming of the Kingdom of Love and Grace and glory.

And because that is what a pioneer is, *all of you*, in the valley churches can be pioneers too. All of you, in small and great ways, can shine a light into the darkness of your neighbours and your communities, and make a way for the Kingdom of God to pass. Yet it has to begin with by asking yourselves whether *you* know the love of God, whether *you* live in the cycle of grace or whether you live in the cycle of grief. Because if we live in the cycle of grief, there's little hope of us, or our churches, of reaching our communities in mission. We'll not be interested, we'll have more important things to do, or if we try we'll burn out, or lack vision. And in that desiccated state, dry, disinserted, or anxious, our churches will probably die. But rooted and grounded in love, being renewed by the cycle of the Spirit's grace, we can, each of us, in small and great ways, plant a new culture of love in our communities, that our neighbours might receive the value and recognition and purpose that the world promises loudly and boldly to them, while all too often, delivering only grief.

It's my hope that that culture of love will more and more take root in this part of the city, and that you in the valley churches will be inspired by God's Spirit to love your neighbours, and to proclaim the coming of Christ's Kingdom.

Let us pray

Heavenly Father

We sometimes wince to accept your love

We think we are strong in the praise of others, or in our own sense of pride,

But we're only resting on a cycle of grief,

That will turn once more, and drag us under with it.

If there is anyone here today

Who needs love in their lives

Who needs to know your touch

And to hear your word of kindness

May this prayer be for them.

If there is anyone here today

Who needs a new start

Who needs that help that no one else can seem to give them

May you give it to them now

And may the church communities represented here

Understand, believe, and be empowered by your truth

That they might declare your grace and saving power

To all they meet,

And pioneer the *culture of love* that this country so sorely needs.

For we ask these things

In the strong name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

Amen