

What Kind of Church is God Calling Us to Be?

Luke 23:50 – 24:12

What kind of church is God calling us to be? That's the question that our moderator Graham Hill has posed for us at this Meeting of the Synod, a question that he will continue to put before us, I imagine, during the course of his moderatorial term. What kind of church is God calling us to be?

Let me begin our consideration of that question by posing another: what kind of church are we now? Imagine for a moment that we are to plot our position as a church on the calendar of the church year. We might, for instance, be an advent church engaged in a period of expectant waiting, waiting on a new Word from God, and making ready for the new thing that God will do among us.

Or are we, perhaps, a Pentecost church, enlivened by the Spirit's presence, engaged in a period of growth and expansion brought about through spirit-filled preaching and miraculous manifestations of the power of God? Are we a church experiencing the rich fellowship of koinonia, sharing all things in common, breaking bread with glad and generous hearts, praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people, as Acts chapter 2 has it? Are we a Pentecost church rejoicing as day-by-day the Lord adds to our number those who are being saved?

Perhaps instead we might be a church in the season of Lent, doing it tough, enduring the wilderness, scratching around for nourishment just to survive and struggling against the temptation to bail out and take an easier road?

Where are we as a church? I suspect if I asked you to respond to my rhetorical question you'd give many different answers. Different congregations to which we each belong are likely to be in different places, represented, to extend the use of my image, by different seasons of the church year. There may be preparatory advent things going on in a congregation in one place, while the Pentecost work of the Spirit may be strongly evident in another; some congregations may be experiencing Lenten struggles, while in others the first stirrings of Easter Sunday and resurrection life are beginning to appear. We are in different places, I suspect, experiencing different stages in the rhythms of congregational growth and decline.

I am going to ask you to indulge me a little further, however, in this imaginative consideration of where we are as a church. I'm thinking now of our collective identity. Think Synod-wide and perhaps even of the national church. Where are we at as the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand?

Here's a suggestion for your consideration.

It's late on Saturday evening. Not just any Saturday, however, but Holy Saturday, or Easter Saturday if you prefer. Night has fallen, and the disciples are gathered together, the few of them that are left, that is, after all that had gone on the day before. Not long ago, the Jesus movement had been riding the crest of a wave. It seemed only a matter of time, as Jesus rode into Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowds, before he would be crowned king before every knee would bow before him, and every tongue confess him Lord. There was a time of such optimism in the New Zealand church, when congregations numbered their Sunday school attendances in the hundreds and the Bible Class movement flourished. But we hear frequently now that the church is in decline — rapid decline, we are told. There are congregations that can no longer

afford ministers, church buildings are being sold off and converted into residences or cafés or art galleries. There are many churches in rural areas, and in cities too, that stand derelict, relics, apparently, of a bygone age.

It is late on Saturday evening, on Holy Saturday evening. The crowds have largely dispersed, and only a remnant remains, a remnant of disciples, confused, bewildered, no longer able to take refuge in the security of a crowd. Worst of all, the very thing, according to Peter, that God would never let happen had in fact come to pass. Their Lord and master had suffered many things — the derision of the crowd, mocking unbelief, persecution — and death. How could this be? If the Christian movement really were of God, how could these things be?

The disciples are gathered together. It is Saturday evening, the shadows have long-since fallen, faith has been unsettled, confidence is all but extinguished, and no one seems sure of what is to happen next.

It's a gloomy picture, I admit, of where we find ourselves as a church. But indulge me a little more.

Although it is still dark — it is past midnight now — there are some women preparing spices and ointments. They are preparing, apparently, to go to the place where Jesus lies and to anoint his body. It's a ritual that's been done for generations, a way of honouring the dead, and of taking care even in the midst of grief and loss. There's a certain refuge to be had in rituals. In the midst of chaos and uncertainty the practice of ritual can serve as a point of orientation, as something to cling to. We've seen that often enough just lately, as people flocked to churches after 9/11, or again after the Christchurch earthquakes.

I am supposed to be painting a picture of what kind of church God is calling us to be. Well here's my first suggestion: we should be a church that knows and treasures the value of its rituals. But let me change the language here. Ritual doesn't have quite the right sense here that I need. We should be a church that knows and treasures the practices of worship and preaching and communion at the Lord's table, that have been practiced by generations before and that have been handed down to us, precisely so that the gospel may be heard among us, and so that we might be renewed and nourished by encounter with the Lord.

Whatever shape the future church may take, and that will no doubt be variable — needing to be appropriate in different ways to particular times and contexts — but whatever forms it takes, it will not be the church unless its people meet regularly for worship, unless they gather often to listen for God's word, to break bread, to confess their sin, and to hear again the declaration of forgiveness and the promise of new life. Whatever happens in the future, the faithful practice of these things is essential, not optional. These are the means by which the gospel is preserved among us, and the means by which God sustains and nourishes, and inspires the church.

The women woke early. . . to conduct a ritual that had been conducted many times before. We should not underestimate the importance of those who attend faithfully to such rituals. It was those women, faithfully attending to the ritual, who discovered that Jesus was risen from the dead. Viewed by others perhaps as a pointless enactment of a worthless tradition, it was through their faithfulness that the women experienced something utterly unimaginable to the dejected and bewildered disciples. They experienced the glory of the risen Lord.

The kind of church that God is calling us to be, I suggest, is a church that knows the value of worship; it knows the value of attending to the Word of God, and of gathering in communion with God and with one another at the table of our Lord. As we look to the future, it seems to me that we need a renewal of our worship so that it becomes clear again that when we gather, and when others come to participate in this thing we call church, it is not a word of our own making that we have come to hear, but the living Word of God. Those who lead us in worship are servants of this Word, witnesses, wherever the miracle takes place again, to the glory of the risen Lord.

But we have gone on ahead of those women who set out at early dawn with their spices and their ointment prepared. They were not to know, of course, of the miracle that lay ahead. And we do not either really. If my picture of where the church is to be found now, in the night-time of Easter Saturday and in the dark hours still of Easter morning, then our present situation is characterised by uncertainty, confusion even, about what the future holds.

I think that does sum up our collective situation pretty well, pockets of vibrancy and activity and renewal notwithstanding. But there is a difference for us from the situation of the first disciples in their night of uncertainty and confusion. We live after the resurrection. And so we should know that in amidst darkness, and uncertainty and confusion, God works miracles. To the disciples that Saturday night, the glory days seemed to be over, their hopes had been extinguished, the crowds had been dispersed, and they knew not what the future held. But as they slept, or perhaps as they lay restless in their beds, God was at work bringing about a miracle.

We who live after the resurrection should know that darkness and uncertainty are not the that Jesus is risen should trust now that for all our struggles and our uncertainty about the future God is not done with his disciples. In amidst darkness and uncertainty, God works miracles.

Let me return, once again, to the women who went early to the tomb. They were the ones who learned first that God had raised Jesus from the dead. And so they became the forerunners of a new and unimagined future. There are forerunners with us still. We heard from one of them last night. We heard about the B@tch congregation, begun by a few disciples who set out into the world, travelling light but travelling hopefully and prayerfully, and who've reported back with joyful news of where the risen Lord may be found. At the centre of that revitalising work is fellowship, communion around the table, a commitment to pastoral care, attention in home groups to the word of God, and at the centre, worship. These are not new practices, of course, but, in the B@tch congregation, they have been reconfigured in a way that has brought new life.

There will be other forerunners, too — people venturing out on new paths, and bringing news of where God is at work among them. I know of others around the country, and you will know of some too. There are other forerunners present here among us. As we adapt ourselves to the future, we need to pay attention to those who have gone on ahead, and now bring news of the new work of God taking shape among them.

Of course, when the disciples first heard the news from the women coming back from the empty tomb, they treated the womens' testimony as no more than an idle tale... and they did not believe. There is much we could say about that, but I

am interested for now, in what eventually made the difference for those disciples. What changed their minds? What was it that enabled them to believe? It was, of course, encounter with the risen Lord himself, in conversation on the road to Emmaus, through breaking bread in a pub at the end of the journey, on a beach one morning as the disciples went out to fish, even behind closed doors as they gathered with one another to remember Jesus' death. Encounter with the risen Lord, in this wide variety of settings, is the one indispensable factor in the transformative work that God does with the church. On the road, in pubs or cafes, in the workplace. . . The risen Christ is at work there, and so we need to be too engaging in those conversations that tell good news.

There is one more thing I want to point out before I finish, indeed it is the high point of the story. The women who ran back from the tomb that first Easter morning brought news that Christ had been raised from the dead.

The first disciples were called, and we are called, to live in the light of that new reality. This is the church's privilege, and task and commission — to participate in and bear witness to the new reality brought about by the raising of Jesus from the dead. There is no better news: the light has dawned, our sinfulness has been pardoned, it has been shown once and for all that death has no future and that the new creation has begun.

Whatever the church may look like in the future, and that, as I have said, will be variable, its form must be determined by joyful participation in this new reality. The church must be a community in which sin genuinely is forgiven, in which love is extended to the unlovely, in which grace abounds. It must be a community in which people genuinely do encounter the risen Christ in worship, in which they find that the barriers

between strangers have really been broken down, and in which they discover that the death-dealing ways of our world, will not have the last word.

I know that I have exploited a generalisation in portraying the church as existing somewhere in the late hours of Easter saturday night, and that there are exceptions to this portrayal, but if it is even half true, let us take confidence in how the story goes on.

Some women went early to the tomb, taking spices to anoint Jesus' body. There they discovered that God had been at work during the night, rolling away stones, unbinding the grave clothes, and overcoming death.

In that news lies our hope still. For each of us, for our world, and for the church, Christ is risen, and is making all things new.

Although we will explore further as this day proceeds, the question of what God is calling us to be, none of us knows for sure how the form of the church may yet evolve. But we can know for sure, that the life of the church depends upon God continuing to work among us, awakening us from our slumbers and working the miracle of resurrection once more.

It is for that reason that I look to the future with confidence and hope.