

St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 8th July 2018

Mark 6: 1 - 3; 2 Cor 12: 2 - 10

Almighty God, your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ is the light of the world. May your people, illuminated by your Word, shine with radiance of his glory, that his love may be known in the world as he lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit one God, now and forever. Amen.

Those who were here last week will remember the story I told about my grim stormy journey by ferry to Shetland from Aberdeen. When my friend and I arrived we stayed two nights in Lerwick before we took the quicker, more scenic, and wiser route home, and flew back to Edinburgh.

For the two nights we were in Lerwick, we stayed not in a hotel or a guesthouse or a Bed and Breakfast, but in someone's home, an arrangement I had made through a very modern accommodation service called Airbnb. Airbnb is a way of booking and paying for accommodation almost anywhere in the world, online. Commonly, guests stay in people's homes, and the arrangement is made directly between the host and the guest. Hosts may rent out a room in their house or their flat, or move out altogether allowing the guest to use their entire home.

I've used Airbnb a number of times now, and it has so far proved very successful. Of course, because people stay in other people's homes, in order to work the arrangement relies on trust. Trust is established by a process whereby hosts rate the quality of their guests, and guests rate the quality of their hosts. You only get to be a guest if previous hosts have given you a good rating, and you only get to host if previous guests give you and your home a good rating.

This arrangement is very different from the traditional way of holidaying. Traditionally, we expect to pay for a service. For example, we pay for a room in a hotel, and expect a standard of service commiserate to what we have paid; it is a transactional process. Although there is a financial transaction to the Airbnb model - you have to pay something - the relationship between the two parties is not based on that financial transaction, but on the trust established between the guest and the host.

The quality of that relationship allows others to trust you in the future so that hosts have faith that a guest they don't know is going to treat their home with respect, or guests have faith that a host they have never met will provide the accommodation they promised.

Airbnb is a new thing that has appeared in our society because of the internet, but in truth this kind of transaction based on the quality of relationships between a guest and a host rather than the service that money is able to buy is not new, it is ancient, and it is also common in societies today other than our own.

Professor Scott Atran is an anthropologist of religious terrorism. In his seminal study called *Talking to the Enemy* Professor Atran describes how the United States forces that occupied Afghanistan seeking Osama bin Laden following the 9/11 terrorist attacks broke every Afghani cultural rule in the book doing so.

Instead of behaving like guests in Afghanistan as would be culturally appropriate, the US behaved as if the peace, democracy and the freedoms it sought to put in place there could be bought with money and sold to the population as a bargain they couldn't resist.

In Afghanistan the Pashtun tribes, writes Prof Atran, have a deeply embedded cultural code of honour based around the relationship between guests and hosts. That relationship is not something that can be bought and sold, but instead needs to be built up on the basis of trust.

Had the United States been more patient and built a relationship with the Pashtun tribes, then Afghans would have been more likely to take a leap of faith and trusted what it was the United States was offering. Instead they were more likely to through their lot in with the Taliban, who better understood the cultural context.

The United States of America is not the first to try to radically change a society. Anyone who has read the Gospel of Mark, as we have been doing here, will know that two thousand years ago Jesus was on a mission to radically change the society he lived in. He wanted to transform his society spiritually using peaceful means, loving relationships and merciful justice. As we have heard over the past few weeks, he wanted, for example, to see a society that was more equal, and where those on the outside could find a place at the table on the inside of society.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark this morning we heard how his method of taking this message of radical change into his society stood in marked contrast to, for example, the militaristic method that the Romans used to attempt to radically transform that society. The Roman method of top-down forced change was not unlike the present day methods used by Western powers in places like Afghanistan and Iraq. Whereas the Romans imposed an alien culture, Jesus worked within the traditional culture of honour that encouraged his disciples to build relationships on the basis of good guests and good hosts.

Jesus taught his disciples to go out in to the local villages with the means of travel - they could take a staff and sandals with them, writes Mark - but without the means to sustain themselves - they weren't to take bread, a pack, or money. They were to stay in people's homes as guests, and where they were not hosted, rather than continuing to impose themselves, they were to move on.

That's not what the Romans did. They most certainly did impose themselves, and like modern military forces they created extended supply lines to feed their troops, or flooded the local economy with money in order to buy food locally.

In our society today, which is very much built on the foundation of a market economy where almost anything can be bought and sold, the manner by which Jesus sent his disciples out to build the Kingdom of God by creating relationships between his disciples and the local population as guests are to hosts, rather than creating a market between his disciples and the local population as buyers and sellers, should help us to reflect on how we as individuals relate to others in our families, our communities, our workplaces, or as citizens of state.

To what extent are our relationships with others influenced by the transactional ethics of the market society we live within? Are our relationships based on what we give and get in return, a system of exchange, or do they have at their root mutually recognized obligations to one another? To what extent do we host others in our lives, or behave as guests in other people's lives?

Perhaps more importantly, or at least more clearly, than a lesson for us as individuals, this passage has a lesson for us as a church in the 21st century. When Jesus sent his disciples out to take his message to the local villages, this mission came at a time of rejection and weakness. Jesus himself had just been rejected in his hometown where, because he wasn't hosted and wasn't able to be a guest, we discover that his message had little affect, 'He could work no miracles there...' writes Mark.

Instead of giving up, Jesus at this low point in his mission regrouped, and sent out his followers with these instructions to behave as guests and to be hosted in the villages around them. We might reflect in the 21st century that we as a Church in Scotland have been rejected in our modern 21st century society by what is now a majority secular culture existing in a market economy. The Church of Scotland, or any church in Scotland, is no longer in the position of strength that it once was.

For those who can remember the days of strength when churches and Sunday Schools were full, and when it seemed the church played a prominent role in society this may seem disheartening and discouraging. But, our two Bible readings this morning remind us that this is far from the first time that our faith has been rejected and felt weak. Our reading from 2 Corinthians reminds us that Paul, in the very early days of the church, felt himself and his message to be weak, yet he argued that, 'when I am weak, then I am strong.'

Now that the Church in Scotland is no longer in a position of strength, no longer integrated and indistinguishable from the secular power of society, no longer able to command respect in a top down way as it once did, perhaps this is an opportunity to build relationships with the society around us in a different way, a more Gospel centred way, based around being minority guests in a majority secular culture. Might this be a way of building trust, and from a position of trust encourage faith?

That the church, and indeed religion in general, can be affective as a minority guest in a majority secular culture was demonstrated very forcefully following the Grenfell fire tower just over a year ago.

In the immediate hours, days, weeks and months that followed the fire churches, other religious institutions like mosques, and voluntary sector organisations were extremely effective in responding to the needs that the fire presented. Reports on the activities of these organisations commend them for their exemplary response. Faith groups were at the forefront of the relief effort from the very first hours during and following the fire.

That exemplary response stands in marked contrast to the state's response, and the local council's response. The fire almost brought down the UK Government because of its seemingly heartless attitude, and the local Council has been roundly criticised for its inability to respond, help and house those affected by the fire.

What is significant about the difference between the faith groups and the state in respect of the fire is the extent to which the faith groups were deeply integrated into the local community. Clergy from churches and mosques had all been in post for over ten years; they were well known, respected, and trusted. The faith groups didn't behave as if they were in charge, but instead knew they were there to serve their communities, and were there only for as long as communities wished to them to be so. They knew they were guests, and behaved as such.

The state institutions on the other hand had a very different relationship with the local community. The Council, for example, was perceived as remote, and wasn't trusted. It was a faceless power, built of a top-down bureaucracy. The Council was an organisation that related to residents in a transactional way, it provided services - or didn't in some cases - which people paid for through their Council Tax. Faith groups, on the other hand, related to residents in a relational way. Consequently, when disaster struck, and money was not enough to buy a solution, it was the faith groups that were able to respond first and best.

In the 21st century in Scotland the Church is weak; it no longer holds the position of strength it once did, as an institution. But, as has so often been the case in the past the question for us who make it up is not, how can we regain the position of strength we once had, but how, when we are weak, can we be strong? One way to do so might be to build relationships of trust as guests in a secular culture so that the communities within which we exist come to believe that we are part of their lives, and to have faith that our presence in their midst can help change our society for the better.

Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.