

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

Isaiah 9:1-7

19th November 2017

Spirit... with imagination... with mystery... with a desire to push us and pull us... onto new ground... beyond these walls... may you inspire the words and thoughts and intent of us all... that does not leave us unchanged... Spirit... come and challenge our presumptions...

I wonder if you might be able to connect the following that have appeared in the news this week... If you have ever watched "Have I Got New For You"... then you'll know the part of the quiz that compares four stories... and contestants have to work out the connection...

This week we have... Zimbabwe: when is a coup not a coup... The Tsukuba express in Japan that apologised for departing 20 seconds early... The Da Vinci painting that sold for something like £350 million... and a number of universities who have been told to remove claims about themselves that might be misleading... I know Have I Got New For You will never offer me a job to write quiz questions... but can anyone work out the link...

Okay I'll put you out of your misery... The link is image...

Zimbabwe's coup wasn't called a coup in order to create the image of a peaceful handover... Da Vinci's Salvator Mundi may not actually have been painted by him... and some Universities have been criticised for giving themselves a better image than they ought to have in their advertising... all three have image problems... except Japan's railways... at least to us... an apology for leaving 20 seconds early has been tweeted millions of times... with the comment... no one expects this will be an apology any UK rail company will have to make...

You can rise and fall on the image you have... and often on the wrong side of that curve... you have to put the church... Those of us in the church... our experience is closer to that of the Japanese train... while those outside the church... their image can often be closer to any of the other three...

When we spoke to people at the Cross last year... as part of our project about what people thought about church... and asked them if they would answer a few questions about New Kilpatrick... most of them declined to speak to us... When told that we weren't trying to get

them to join... then they were a little bit more forthcoming... But over the years... to put it crudely... the image is... the church is out to get you...

More truthfully... we want people like Finlay... to experience the richness of life... the love of community... the sense of faith and hope we live by... the promise we see in each other... the possibility of God...

And we do that by offering and inviting folk... to explore a different world view than the status quo... a way called faith that is big enough to share the stories of God that we have... with others... and listening to theirs... to debate all our traditions and experiences... to stretch each others questions and ideas... and find common ground in loving neighbour...

It's not always the image that readily comes to mind... but I have news for you... such an image is rather ancient... and goes way back to a man called Isaiah...

So let's go back there... and with fresh ears... listen to words... the ancients wrote... and hear them as if for the first time... and the story they tell... it might shift the perspective... which is what we try to do here all the time... shift the perspective... peel back the world through the stories we tell... and find the hope...

Isaiah... was a prophet... some of whose words we heard today... but for those who are familiar with the the more classical traditions of Christmas... already planted in your mind... is that part of Handel's Messiah... For unto us a child is born unto us a son is given...

But we can limit these prophetic words however... if we believe Mr Handel has forever nailed down that piece of the Bible to the Christmas season...

Today... we take Isaiah out of Christmas... and hear his words... in a different season... and wonder if we can hear them any differently...

Isaiah the prophet... but again already we hit on another image problem... Prophets weren't well connected soothsayers who knew what was going to happen in the future and could then predicted events... They had no more insight into the future than any of us...

So Isaiah is not necessarily foretelling Jesus... Isaiah is responding to what is happening in that moment... in that particular place... At this time... there is a whole lot of tension... with countries to the east... Leaders and people confused... New alliances are being created... old ones questioned... (sound familiar)... The job of a prophet was not to predict how this would end... but to speak outside the ideology... speak outside the presumptions... speak outside the unimaginative and frightened circles of the establishment...

Prophets... and Isaiah was a big one... used poetry... and imagery... and symbols... to try and reimagine the future... What we read today... is Isaiah saying... lets get creative... let's reimagine the future... lets not go down the same old roads we end up doing all the time... but let's think outside the ideology of the time... the presumptions of the moment... because that is where God... where the spirit... wants to take us... God is not tied to any particular establishment... any particular leader... any particular empire... or church... God's imagination exists outside the established ideology of the time...

So Isaiah takes the image of a child... a real child being born in the court of the king... and reimagines the future... Remember the context of the invading armies... Isaiah reimagines the future round the potential of that child... rather than the warring armies...

There is a story that when the designers of the Citroen CV wanted to design that car... they put square wheels on it and said... Right now... how do we make it move...

The idea was to put themselves in a different place... where the rules were different... in order not to fall into the trap of ending up with the same general car design... Now perhaps that is simply an urban myth... but myths aren't made up... they put us in a new place to help us reimagine the world... It is what Isaiah was doing... reimagining...

It is also what the church is called to do... Our deep tradition... is the legacy of the prophets... Isaiah... who invites us to find our prophetic imagination... and think outside the ideology and presumptions of the time...

And to use that prophetic imagination... not just to better ourselves... or to get more people into church... but to reimagine the whole community... to voice the possibilities...

and new ways of relationships... to our neighbours of whatever faith or none they may be... This prophetic imagination is specifically not for or about ourselves... but our whole parish... our whole neighbourhood... and our whole society...

Our calling... is to live faithfully with prophetic imagination... and to imagine the world... and establish relationships... beyond the particular political fashion or doctrines or values of the times... and towards the kingdom of God...

The bible is full of such moments... Each prophet's poetic imagination... is not aimed at some distant future... but aimed directly for the time in which they live... to refuse to adopt the schemes of those who make empire... and oppress... but to imagine the world and our relationship with it... differently... and live beyond the tired patterns of the time... and then we really can say to folk in our neighbourhood... Have you seen the church lately?...

No?... Well... Have I Got News for you...