

New Kilpatrick

Sermon

24th April 2016

John 10:1-10

Spirit... lead us by quiet waters... but also by the noisy streets... provide us with pastures green... but also guide us to the barren places where your people are found... tables of banquets as well as tables of bread and wine... Shepherding Spirit... come and lead us again... So be it... Amen

Today we have used some of the words... certainly some of the culture... and will do so again later... in the style of the first reformed communion in the west of Scotland 460 years ago... words that were of the people... in the vernacular... down to earth and everyday...

Does such everydayness sit comfortably with the significance we give holy communion...? Or is shakespearean language more appropriate to shape this communion space... whose style we have also used today in memory of his death...

Neither approach is in any way wrong... but it is interesting how our tradition has evolved... We have responses today... which the reformers invented... that people could understand... in the vernacular... yet we are less comfortable with them now...

Then... there would have been shortbread... or oatcakes perhaps... not the gluten free bread we share today...

In New Kilpatrick then there would have been no communion table... Heaven forbid!... We would have sat round the minister's kitchen table... brought to the sanctuary... and scrubbed... When the first communion table was placed in Govan Old... many years later... thousands of horsemen were needed to quell the riot...

And elders... You wouldn't have seen any serving... Elders disciplined... serving bread and wine was beneath such a calling... We'd serve ourselves... but only if you'd received due instruction in the doctrine of the church... and received your token from doing so...

I know one minister... Actually that is a lie... he lived in 1765... but he was new to his charge... announced communion would be shared in two weeks... The next Sunday he cancelled having discovered the congregation was not... in his opinion... fit to receive...

One and a half years later... it was served... after he himself... visited every household and instructed them on the sacrament and doctrine of the church...

What we experience now has evolved quite a bit...

One of the principles of the reformation was to make the Word of God familiar to the people... to speak in the vernacular... to make it possible for every follower to understand... discuss... and learn the Word of God...

Yet throughout our history... because of our deep respect for the things that are holy... we have at times made it *more* difficult for people to reach the source of that holiness...

We had to prove we had been appropriately instructed by receiving a token... we had to be adults... we would have a communion season... a week of services of preparation... where upon the table would be fenced... having been cleaned and set... ready for Communion...

These are not expected in our tradition today... and many would be quite horrified to go back to this more restrictive... rule based... fencing of the table...

We have no communion cards or tokens... everyone of any age is welcome... and of any tradition... We have no season... no preparatory service... and state... this is an open table to all those who love the lord and would like to love him more...

We have become less gatekeepers that we were in the past... and more willing to open this table to all... We have less concern in protecting it... and more concern in making people feel at ease... Less funereal and more celebratory... There are also fewer of us... where even 50 years ago we would have had two sittings in the morning... and even then people would be sitting on the window sills... But many will remember those days... the rehearsals... the dark suits... the tails... and how those who were used to daily running global companies with budgets of millions and workforces of thousands... were more frightened in being out of line at communion...

Do we look on all that with as much affection as fear... a discipline and formality we do not offer today... Are we too open... too generous... Have we lost something... that a stricter practice held together...

'I AM the gatekeeper' said Jesus... and the phrase today is used in a restrictive sense... attached as it is to the fear of anyone not of the sheepfold... Gatekeeping... circles the wagons... keeps the flock safe... but restricts entry to thieves and bandits...

And when things are fragile in our faith or the world... and we see this in the European Referendum... we start gatekeeping... seeking greater narrowness... isolation... and fear...

In the church... back in those days of full communion... your conscience was trusted... now gatekeeping is everywhere... the breadth of the church is narrowing...

But the irony is... when Jesus talks of being the gatekeeper... he means protection yes... but also... I will open the gate... so the sheep can go out into the world... This too is what a gatekeeper does... invites the sheep... us... to go into the world...

To stay in the sheep fold... limits... and you cannot be there for ever... Gates work both ways... you come in and go out... to take risks... find new pastures... I AM the gatekeeper... is an invitation for the sheep out into the world...

Which brings us back to our communion table... This is a place which is ultimately... an invitation not to remain here... but go into the world...

And in the changing and evolving of this tradition... we witness diligence in being in the world... Those experiences change us... in how we know God... in how we speak of love... how we present the faith to others... We do not lose the past... but it continually reshapes and reforms us... We are living the call the gatekeeper gives us... to be in the world...

This is the gift of the bread and wine... to move us... forgiven... renewed... transformed... and be God's love... to every stranger... and friend... in the world...

You cannot do that... without being changed... and changing what we do... If we still fenced the table... if we still had to receive a token to come... if we still sat round the ministers kitchen table... it would perhaps be a worryingly narrow thing we did... that we had been unmoved by the very world... the gatekeeper... invites us into... and this bread and wine is a gift for...

I am the gatekeeper... says Jesus... I open the gate and let you out... not keep you in... Let us invite all to enjoy this gift we dare not limit to ourselves...