

Who would you invite?

In 2005, seven pupils from Drumchapel High School in Glasgow formed a group to campaign for the release of their friend Agnesa and her family who had been detained in a dawn raid. Pupils at the school signed a petition and the group - who became known as the Glasgow Girls - raised awareness of the poor treatment of asylum-seeking families whose rights of appeal had been exhausted.

Through their campaigning, the Glasgow Girls gained support from Jack McConnell, who was then First Minister, and from many MSPs who raised the issue with the Home Office. Agnesa and her family were eventually released. The Glasgow Girls have inspired many people, and two documentaries and a musical telling their story have been produced.

It's an inspirational story of how young people can challenge prejudice and closed systems. How they can see beyond the system and see real people in desperate need.

Our readings today touch on the issues that Glasgow Girls faced. For today Jesus is found challenging his closed minded institution. He is asking the question, Why are you excluding people from the Kingdom? Why are you neglecting people's needs? Why, are people being excluded from God's grace and mercy?

But this passage is not just about Jesus challenging the institution, it is also instruction on mission, and I believe it directly connects with our new Cadder Growth Structure, that we are putting in place, and that we are beginning to develop. I will come back to this later in the sermon.

But let us firstly consider the passage. The event is focused on a leading Jewish Pharisee holding a dinner party. A Pharisee was a member of a strict Jewish sect, that fervently believed in upholding the Jewish Law to its limit.

At these parties, it was a good idea to invite someone who was interesting, and even controversial. Jesus fitted the bill, and all eyes were on him as he entered the house. If it was today, camera and phones would be at the ready, on hand to catch his words and actions. They

expected Jesus, to say or do something that would challenge them and he didn't disappoint.

A man who had dropsy was brought in for everyone to watch Jesus heal him. The symptoms being excessive swelling in the feet, ankles and legs. That was his physical condition, his spiritual condition was that he was excluded. This healing happened on their Sabbath, so the religious purists were putting Jesus to the test on two accounts; will he heal on the Sabbath, can he heal this man?

Our dear Dr Luke as the Apostle Paul calls him, gives us an insight into this remarkable dinner party; and in doing so, he has given us an insight into the life and thoughts of Jesus; one which we should treasure and hold on to. Anything that was important to Jesus is important to God, and if it's important to God, then it is surely a marker for us, on how to live our lives, individually and collectively.

These stories are to help us in our walk with Jesus. They are there for us to literally catch the spirit of Jesus. The Apostle Paul encouraged his churches to have the mind of Christ, so by reading the Gospels we develop the mind of Jesus.

What is Dr Luke and more importantly Jesus telling us through this event?

Firstly, Inclusion. Secondly, Humility. Thirdly, Welcome and Invite

This man with dropsy was important to Jesus and important to God. But his illness, dropsy, kept him away from the church and therefore kept him from God. Jesus came to knock down those barriers and make God accessible to all. His ministry was one of inclusion, and that's what made him so unpopular to the church of his time, for his message was that God is interested in everyone, not just the self-righteous and those who saw themselves as morally upright; God has a heart for the poor, the prostitute, the sinner, the cheat and he is reaching out to them through Jesus. It is this inclusive love that would eventually rock the Jewish church to the core; crowds were attracted to Jesus, for suddenly someone who claimed to come from God was on their side, and prepared to put his neck on the line for them. Jesus was the Son of God in human flesh, but he was also the Son of man. This unique combination made him special.

One of our remits for our newly formed care and fellowship team, is to “Identify where care is needed around the church and develop ways in which to respond to that need”. This is what Jesus has done. He has identified the primary need in his church, social exclusion, and he is responding to that need.

So, to follow Jesus is to walk in the ways of inclusion, to see that God's kingdom is bigger than the church institution and that God is actively at work in those in our society who may perceive as worthless.

Mahatma Gandhi wrote in his autobiography, that during his student days in America, he read the Gospels and seriously considered converting to Christianity. So, one Sunday, he decided to attend a nearby church and talk to the minister. But when he arrived, the usher refused to give him a seat and suggested he go worship with his own people. He said he left the church and decided, “If Christians have a caste system, I might as well remain a Hindu.” That usher not only betrayed Jesus, he turned a person away from trust in Him. That is why James, brother of our Lord was so emphatic in condemning prejudice.

Secondly, at the heart of Jesus' ministry is humility.

That touches on Jesus' illustration today.

Jesus paints a word picture of guests at a wedding and they have taken places at the top of the table and the host comes and moves them to a lower table, Jesus offers this advice: “Take a lower table so that the host might honour you and promote you to a higher table.”

Our Community and Outreach team has the remit, “Explore opportunities to reach out to our community to meet local human needs and address inequalities”.

This is what Jesus is doing here by telling a story. Who do we want to sit at the top of the table or to put it into a church context, who do we want to see coming and being part of this church or to be even more radical and challenging, who does God want to see worshipping with us?

Perhaps, if Churches today, took this story closer to their heart, it would revolutionise our churches – certainly turn them upside down, outside in. Is that not what our gospel reading today is all about? I think it is simply the lesson of humility and it can be summed up in the words in verse 11, “For all those who make themselves great will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be made great.”

This is highlighted in the Beatitudes, Matthew 5 v5 “Blessed are the humble for they will receive what God has promised!” Or as Eugene Peterson translates, “You're blessed when you are content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.”

If we apply today's message to our churches, it becomes very radical. If Jesus was invited to some of our churches today, what would he see? Would there be a clamour of people to get near him at the top table? Would there need to be a meeting to decide a seating arrangements? Who would sit on his right and left? Or maybe the question would be, who would Jesus want to sit next to him?

Dr Eddie Gibbs, in his classic book, “Emerging Church” writes this, “Members of emerging churches are committed to non-members. They see the church as a place offering hospitality to all, in concrete ways, and they do not reject those whom are deemed undesirable. Their emphasis is on ministry in the surrounding communities and to worldwide needs rather than ministry that is primarily focussed on church members. They are able to place such a strong emphasis on serving others because they are not preoccupied with running programmes of the church, and raising support for salaries and building maintenance.”

One of the challenges that we face today in the Church of Scotland, is that we have become so preoccupied with saving our churches, that we are in grave danger of losing our churches, because we have lost our vision of reaching out beyond our own walls and into our communities. The churches that adopt Jesus' lead in mission and ministry, will be robust and energised to go forward. But it takes a dose of humility.

They had no answer to Jesus' questions about Sabbath healing. He stunned them, with his inclusivity and humility; he left them groping in the dark for an answer.

The third and final point is welcome and invite.

Those who were initially invited did not respond to the invitation to attend the Master's banquet, they were so busy with the affairs of life. Jesus of course is directly referring to the Pharisees, the insiders, so he tells the story of those who refused the invite and so the Master sends out an invitation for his servants, to go out and welcome those who are poor, maimed, blind and lame and then go even further and welcome all who are on the margins of life for there is room for them also.

At the heart of our Teach and Tell team is to “develop a teaching programme to share the message of Jesus in both formal and informal ways with members and with those who want to know more about the Christian faith. In other words, welcome and invite people into a deeper understanding of Christ and His Kingdom.

One of the girls in the The Glasgow Girls was herself a refugee; she came from war torn Somalia, she found herself in London, being told that she and her mum and family were being transported to Glasgow, she asked her mum, have you heard of Glasgow, her mum said no, have you heard of Scotland, her mum said no and so off they went into the unknown, into Drumchapel.

But now she can look back and say that she loves Glasgow and Scotland and Glasgow and Scotland is her home, she is eloquent in speech, fluent in English, even with a Glaswegian twang, and works now with people with mental health issues around the issue of refugees.

She said that she found a warm welcome from the Glasgow people, but not so from the institutions and authorities, who were at that time breaking into people's houses at dawn, and handcuffing and taking them away to a remand centre, which she said was simply a prison for people who had done nothing wrong, except escape to safety.

What has this taught her? She said that she has learned how to use her voice for positive change...

This passage informs us of the great commission of Jesus, to "make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The servants were sent out into the highways and byways. They were sent into their communities to invite people to come to the banquet.

Today our passages raise vital questions and questions that need reflection upon by the church locally and nationally. In what ways are we demonstrating the five marks of mission?

1. To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth

Generosity and hospitality are costly and do not always reap rewards. Hebrews 13 says that we may, like Abraham, Gideon and Manoah, have entertained angels without even realising it – should that not be enough of a blessing to want to offer kindness, grace, sustenance and love to those who need it the most?

So today, our reading is about mission, and about reaching out to be a community that is inclusive, humble, invitational and welcoming to all within our community. That was the way of Jesus and by allowing these qualities to become our focus, we are indeed becoming the mind of Christ.

We have taken a major step in setting up a growth structure, our next task is to make this structure work for us to the glory of God.

Amen