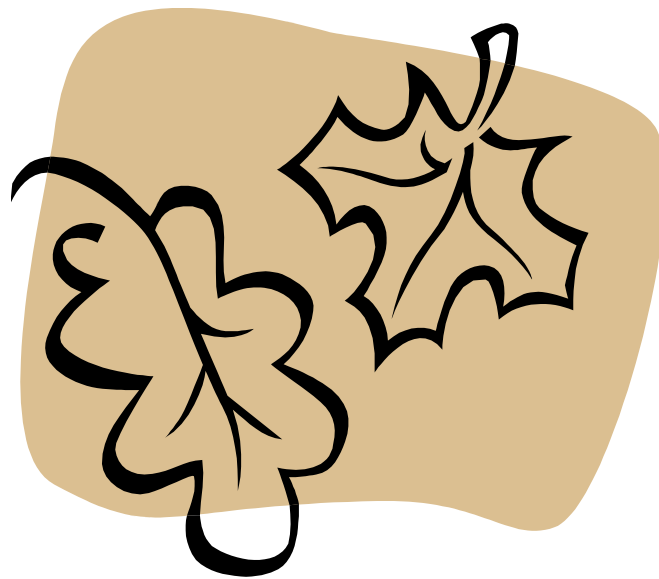


# AUTUMN LEAVES

Volume 5



**Alasdair Gordon**

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## Foreword

I have much pleasure in presenting the fifth volume of my *Autumn Leaves*, drawn mainly from the 1970s but also, on this occasion, containing some more recent items. There is no one particular theme.

As always, I trust that my long-suffering friends will enjoy these contributions and will also forgive their many shortcomings.

They make no pretensions to be scholarly works!

Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton  
South Lanarkshire

August 2014

## The Church Today <sup>1</sup>

I want to thank your minister and Kirk Session for the kind invitation to lead this workshop today. I come to you simply as an ordinary parish minister rather than as the Clerk <sup>2</sup> to Aberdeen Presbytery.

The first thing I want to say is that I have not come to tell you how to do your job as office bearers or elders or committed members. Some of you have been faithfully serving in the Kirk for a lot longer than I have and there are many things that you could - and hopefully will - tell me. In fact, as we open to discussion later on, I welcome all of your input. You all have experience, insight and knowledge, so let's not be shy in sharing these resources.

And let me state something that is perhaps only too obvious. What the church is today will greatly affect the church of tomorrow. But we do have to live in the present and make decisions in the present. We cannot live in the past, although it is always good to look back and see how far we have come. I find that people in the church are actually just as guilty of living in the future. We will agree to almost any change as long as it does not mean any changes right now! We will agree to change things next year, but like tomorrow, next year never comes. I let that thought simmer and we may come back to it later.

In proceeding, I want to simply flag up some points for possible further discussion, some more important than others.

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<sup>1</sup> Outline of office bearers' workshop lead by me at Ferryhill North Church, Aberdeen on 29 September 1974.

<sup>2</sup> I was acting as Clerk at the time. I formally succeeded Rev John Mowat MA JP as Clerk to Aberdeen Presbytery on 1 January 1976.

At the moment we have a slow but steady numerical decline in the number of active ministers. The average age of a Church of Scotland minister is around 55. Whilst that is scarcely "old", in twenty years time the situation may become more serious.<sup>3</sup> It is encouraging to see that there are still a good number of younger men coming forward for theological training. The less encouraging aspect - and I lead a few tutorial classes at Christ's College, so I do see something of the wider picture - is that many of these younger folks do not see themselves going in to traditional parish ministry.<sup>4</sup>

Even since I myself trained as recently as in the last decade, "things" have begun to change.<sup>5</sup> We do need to think about some of the implications of this. It would be nice to be able to ignore these uncomfortable facts, but this is not an option. But let me ask you this - is this only a problem or is it also an opportunity? We could, of course, just give up. Unfortunately, some people already have. It is hard not to feel a touch of discouragement at times when we see declining numbers and so many churches closing their doors. I remarked to a friend recently that the centre of Aberdeen bears an uncanny resemblance to Moscow with all its empty churches.

I suggest that we (and that includes me) need to have a bit more confidence in who we are, what we do and what we stand for. It is so easy to talk ourselves down. As ministers, office bearers and elders we have a duty to remember to encourage one another and build one another up in the faith.

Whilst I do believe - and believe strongly - that there has to be a much higher input from lay people, I am not suggesting that all the tasks that ministers don't want to do should be dumped on

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<sup>3</sup> In 2014, it was recorded that there were only two ministers under the age of 30.

<sup>4</sup> Currently there are only a handful of candidates for Church of Scotland ministry.

<sup>5</sup> There have been many changes both in ministry and in training for the ministry since this time.

them. There has to be full cooperation at all levels. I am only too aware that churches can sometimes be manipulative places and people can be put into situations where they feel they cannot refuse a request. That is not fair. It is one thing to encourage people to stretch themselves and indeed to challenge them in an appropriate manner. It is quite different to force people to do something with which they are less than happy, even worse if we resort to guilt spinning. Similarly, if someone genuinely wants to stop doing something, they need to have the freedom to do so. A senior minister once gave me the advice that if any member of the congregation submits his or her resignation from some position of responsibility, the default position should be to accept.

The trouble with ministers (well, one of the troubles!) is that we are not actually perfect. We do not belong to some remarkable sub-species. Now, congregations do have high expectations of their ministers and they have every right so to do. However, the expectations have to be reasonable and congregations in their turn should not play the guilt card. The minister is entitled to a wee bit of personal space even if he is on call day and night. He should be allowed to make mistakes or misjudge situations like anyone else without it being a big issue. You cannot have two standards of morality, one for ministers and another (lower standard) for everyone else, can you?

When a congregation is looking for a minister, invariably they want someone who has the virtues of all their past ministers within living memory but without any of their shortcomings. This is scarcely realistic! And, of course, many congregations assume that the minister's wife will act as an unpaid assistant and receptionist, lead the Guild and generally dispense good works throughout the church and parish. Increasingly, ministerial wives

want to have careers of their own and are entitled so to do. I make this point but I won't labour it.

However, speaking about ministers, I would make the point that Kirk Sessions have it within their power to make or break their minister. It does not mean that everyone has to agree all of the time. That would be impossible. Indeed, I would go further and suggest that a bit of appropriately expressed and managed conflict within any group can actually be a good thing. It means that different views can be spoken (not just thought) and aired. Sometimes out of two or more apparently conflicting ideas something new can emerge. What can be incredibly frustrating is having people come to a session meeting with a definite viewpoint, say nothing and then "beef" all the way home.

The Gospel is all about reconciliation. If Christians cannot hold together in difficult times, who can?

And still speaking about ministers, they also need to learn to let go at least occasionally and show that they actually do have confidence in their own members. So, if (say) an elder visits someone in hospital, it is not necessary for the minister to race round the next day. That merely duplicates the work. It certainly does not reduce it.

In the New English Bible (which is not actually my favourite translation) the heading above the First Letter of John is "A Recall to Fundamentals".<sup>6</sup> We all need such a recall at times. What is this church stuff all about? Is there really any difference between you and the nice moral person next door who never darkens the Kirk door?

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<sup>6</sup> This last word did not have the negative connotations that it does today.

It is easy to play at churches and to be content with the green leaves of "churchianity" rather than the fruits of the Holy Spirit. We can get so bogged down in "church stuff" that we forget why we even exist, far less what we stand for.

The First Book of Discipline says that elders shall be "*...men of the best knowledge in God's Word, of cleanest life, faithful and of most honest conversation that may be found in the church.*"

In the early times of Knox and the Reformers, elders were elected annually. Is this a good idea? Would it be an opportunity for re-commitment or merely an irksome interruption? <sup>7</sup>

I frequently experience office bearers and elders telling me, often with a degree of genuine regret, that they feel very untaught and ill prepared. It is easy to look at whose "fault" this is but it is more important to know what to do about it. Knowledge is not everything, of course, but some knowledge must surely be helpful. How good an account can we give of why we are disciples of Jesus Christ?

It has been said that spirituality (in its widest sense) is like a bank account. Of course there are times when we need to draw on it but we need to pay in as well. In many ways, in the Kirk today, it is as though we are living on the spiritual capital of previous generations and putting little back in. Is that an unfair or mistaken perception? How can that be changed?

Have you considered Study Groups or House Groups? Would these be for office bearers or would you also include members and even non members. Like it or not, the "habit" of church attendance is on the decline. We won't get people back to church by nagging them or making them feel guilty for not coming.

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<sup>7</sup> Women were admitted to the eldership in 1966 and to the ministry in 1968.



Many churches, in spite of declining attendance on Sundays, report thriving organisations. The Guild, the Boys' Brigade, the Guides, the badminton club and such like are often well attended and even enthusiastically supported. We used to look to the organisations for young people as vehicles for bringing them into full membership of the church. That is no longer happening. What do we make of this? Is there a way of using these organisations to encourage people into membership or is that a lost cause?

So far, all I have done is throw stuff at you and given you no opportunities to respond or discuss. I know that the plan now is to break into one or two groups and then come together for a plenary session. Remember that you will inevitably have quite a lot to think about and you may well feel that you need to go away and do some more thinking. We do not need to come up with quick and easy answers to everything today.

As an aid to discussion, I have agreed three possible questions with your minister and these are to be issued to the group after the tea / coffee break. Remember that there are no right or wrong answers nor is there such a thing as a silly question. Everyone's input is of value.

In the meantime, let me finish this part of the proceedings by reading out the three questions so that you know what is coming! Thank you for your patience so far. Your minister and I will look forward to sitting in on the groups and hearing what you have to say.

1. What do you feel is the greatest challenge facing the average parish church today and how best can it be equipped?

2. As office bearers what form of training would you find most useful for carrying out your duties?
  
3. What special contributions (if any) can women elders <sup>8</sup> and office bearers make?

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<sup>8</sup> Ferryhill North Church was one of the first churches in Aberdeen to ordain women elders. Even in 1974 they were still considered as somewhat of a novelty. It was presumed at the time that women elders would offer a different model of eldership from men. This presumption might not apply today.  
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## Get your Harp in Tune <sup>9</sup>

*Text: We hanged our harps upon the willows. [Psalm 137: 2]*

This is a powerful and highly emotional Psalm, well known for its poetic beauty. One of the easiest ways of understanding the figurative and metaphorical language of the Psalms is to put the words into their context. In other words, to what historical situation in the religious experience of Israel does a particular Psalm speak?

The context for this Psalm is actually quite simple. It refers to the period when Israel was in exile. This basic fact not only helps us to understand what was happening to the people of God at that time of history, it also encourages us - in a quite different situation - many hundreds of years afterwards.

Now, God's people had been in exile before. For many years, they were in exiled in Egypt and it had been a terrible experience for them - slavery, brutality, starvation, even murder. Finally, to cut a long story short, God had turned Pharaoh's heart by sending the angel of death over the land. God had then led them out under the leadership of Moses on an incredible journey, even to the parting of the waters of the Red Sea. God promised to take them to home to their promised land from which they had been absent for so long.

But the children of Israel were, as we are told, a stiff necked people. No sooner were they free of the tyranny of Egypt, than they wanted back again. They preferred the security of slavery to the freedom of being the children of God. And, it is nothing new that people often refer back to the "good old days" which,

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<sup>9</sup> Outline of the sermon preached at the communion service at the close of the day at Ferryhill North.  
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if more closely examined were not just quite as good as they remembered.

This is a game we are quite good at in the Kirk, harking back to days that will never return and possibly never were in the first place, those days when the Kirks were full twice on a Sunday! But for the children of Israel, the eventual repossession of the land some years later, under Joshua, was the culmination of their nation's history for those who experienced it and also for subsequent generations. It was the climax of the national dream. It was almost too wonderful to be true; they had arrived.

But as the years had gone on, something had happened, just as happens today. Prosperity dulled their acute dependence on God. They became preoccupied with things and possessions. Their zeal cooled off and their faith became more nominal and formal.

But God did not cease to love or care for his people and so he had to allow them to learn the hard way. The majority of the people were carried away into exile in Babylon. In that distant land, they were to be tried and tested, refined and made ready for the day when a remnant of the people would be able to return again to the homeland and build up a new nation to fulfil God's gracious purposes.

Once the people had been victors; now they were victims. Once they had been their own masters and now they were slaves. Once they had lived in their own homes. Now they were aliens and strangers in a far-off land. Once they had been happy but now they were sad. Once they had sung with joy and made a happy noise before the Lord. Now they had hung their harps on the willow trees and wallowed in self pity. Even worse, they are taunted and ridiculed by their captors. They feel utterly broken

by their environment and completely demoralised by their troubles.

So, they quit; they no longer sang. *"How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"* Their harps hung silent and unplayed.

Well, that's all in the past, you might say. It is something that happened centuries ago and we don't associate easily with harps. In fact, few, if any of us will even know anyone who plays a harp. It has become very much a minority instrument. However, harps have great symbolic significance. The harp is, for example, the emblem of Ireland. Traditionally playing the harp is a kind of metaphor for practising what is most important to you - your faith!

I suggest that, at the present time, many people have spiritually hung their harps on the willows. Once they knew the joy of a true and happy Christian experience and greatly valued Christian worship and experience. Then something happened. Maybe there was bad experience in church. Maybe there was some major setback or disappointment in life. Perhaps the faith has got squeezed out by work or by the cares of this world. But the end result was that they quit.

And an uncomfortably high percentage of our congregations include quite a number who fit into the category. I don't want to sound harsh or judgmental and it is always easy to be critical of people who are not here and cannot even respond. In fact, if I may dare say so, it is always easy to sit and listen to sermons that we think apply to other people, rather than to ourselves.

But what is our response to the (if we are being honest) absent majority in our congregations? They will prefer to remain

inactive. They desire status without work, membership without service, receiving without giving and identification without participation. Again, I am sorry if that sounds unduly harsh.

May I suggest that in the church our problem is not with numbers - it is numbness. It is not so much either that people do not have faith, it is rather that the faith does not have people. Deserted harps, it seems, can be found on every tree.

So, why were (and are) the harps deserted?

Those who were giving out such a negative message were living in the past, so much so that they were unable to look at the present, far less the future. Please don't get me wrong. As I was suggesting to you earlier on, it can be very useful and even encouraging to look back.

The warning note that I would sound is that the greatest lesson of history is that we don't learn from history. However, I confess that I enjoy reading history, especially through biography and autobiography. There are things we can learn and it is clear that some understanding of the past can help us understand the present. But, beware of the "good old days" culture.

The people who were in exile in Babylon could - or would - only look at the past or, to be more accurate, the past as they wanted to see it, the "good old days", which were never as good as we remember them. I remember as a child how the beautiful hot summers lasted for weeks on end. That, of course, is not how it was, but that is what I remember. I expect you all have similar experiences.

The people in exile had (fairly obviously) moved both physically and mentally. In this case they had been moved very much against their will. They were far from home. Again, I suggest that this rings a bell with our contemporary situation. There is no doubt that there is a general feeling of alienation among many people.

Community spirit is not entirely lost but it is much weaker than it used to be. This applies especially in our cities where people can literally live under the same roof and not even know the names of their neighbours.

According to the papers, a large percentage of our population now live in post war housing and roughly one in five families will move house this year. We are a much more mobile society than we used to be. Indeed, many people are on the move and yet, only too often, their faith does not move with them. A new job, a new house, an addition to the family - all these and many more factors cause people to slip away from the faith of their fathers. Sometimes it is hurt pride; people have not got their own way and so they vote with their feet. Sometimes also people have bad experiences in church and feel disinclined to go back.

One of the commonest reasons for desertion is when (like the Israelites of old) people do not get their own way. I don't mean just human stubbornness and again I don't mean this to sound harsh. The children of Israel were fed up with God. They just could not understand why he had allowed this to happen. What had they done that was so awful? They could gladly have sung God's praises in the Temple but how could they possibly do so by the far way waters of Babylon?

They were pretty angry at God. He had not acted in the way in which they thought he should and so they took the easy way out.

It is not hard to sing God's praise when the time seems right, when we are prosperous and apparently in control of our own lives and can spare God the occasional hour. It is also much easier to be religious in a religious age. It is not so easy for us, as we live in a sophisticated modern secular age. It is much easier to be a Christian when our friends, relatives and work colleagues are of a similar persuasion. It is not so easy to dare to be a Daniel and to stand alone.

There are many reasons for people apparently quitting the Christian faith. This is a great challenge to all of us. We cannot be responsible for what other people think or do but we can do our very best to make our churches places of welcome and acceptance and show them in particular that the Gospel does work in our own lives.

But what is so hard anyway about being a Christian at this time in history? I suggest that even in "easier" times there were always challenges. Let us not make it all doom and gloom and give the impression that being a Christian is all about negativity and what people should not do or will have to give up. Jesus said that his yolk is easy and his burden is light and compared with the cares of this world and the deceit of riches there is no comparison.

We are never promised a life that is without difficulty or challenge. To suggest that is travesty of the Gospel. There is a great hymn in our hymnbooks that was been ruined by someone, at a later date, adding the drivelling chorus that ends with the words "And now I am happy all the day." It depends, of course, what you mean by "happy". If people think it means health, pleasure and prosperity, in fact there is no such unequivocal promise given. Jesus himself was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.



Yet it is in Jesus Christ that we see the answer and where the church's message is (or should be) so very different from that of the world. Yes, we can share the attitudes of other non-Christian people in our concern for caring for the less fortunate and helping to establish a just society. But if that is all we do, what use are we? If the church is nothing more than being nice and following certain moral standards, it has certainly lost its cutting edge.

My friends, the church is always at its best and at its strongest when Jesus Christ, crucified, risen and ascended, is at the centre.

Around 635 AD, a Syrian missionary took the Christian Gospel to China for the very first time. For the next century and a half the Christian message spread and flourished throughout China. Then a kind of rot began to set in. People, especially the wealthier, become more nominal in their outlook and only loosely followed a selection of the moral teachings of the Bible. And even these were only "roughly kept in mind". The less convenient teachings were relegated and the person of Jesus was sidelined. For centuries thereafter there was virtually no Christian witness in China.

In a very real sense, it was because they had actually forgotten the very real basics of what they stood for that the Jews found themselves in such a dire position. What they stood for had only been "roughly kept in mind". Their calling was to be a light to lighten the gentiles. Yet they had kept that light hidden and used it only to please themselves.

So, actually, a great deal of the remedy was, humanly speaking, in their hands. It was time to get these harps, the symbols of their faith, down from the trees.

What do you do with a deserted harp?

Get in hand. We all have a faith that God gave us and it is a faith to be used and shared, not kept in a glass case or hung up on a tree.

Get it in tune. Are you "in tune" with the Word of God and playing your part in the orchestra of faithful people (if that's not pressing the analogy too far!)?

Get it in service. It is a strange fact that if a musical instrument is not played, it deteriorates. Indeed, the more it is played, the better the sound. So, let us use and - in the best sense - enjoy the great faith and message that we have and share.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> I am sorry to record that Ferryhill North Church building is now a block of flats.  
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## **Celebrating 130 Years <sup>11</sup>**

### **Opening Prayer:**

**Our gracious God and heavenly Father who's Son, Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday and forever, we give thanks for your grace and faithfulness towards us and for your many mercies which are new every morning. We give thanks for your faithfulness throughout all the generations and pray your blessing upon us now as we bring this evening to a close in this short time of worship together.**

### **Scripture Reading: *Isaiah 61: 1 - 6***

**It is a great pleasure and honour to be asked to bring this first of four days of celebration to a close. Earlier this evening, the proceedings were officially opened by the Moderator of the General Assembly <sup>12</sup> and clearly you have got off to an excellent start as you look forwards as well as backwards at this time in your church's history.**

**It is actually quite difficult to imagine ourselves living 130 years ago in 1844. There was no electric light, no radio, no television and no telephone. <sup>13</sup> The universal postal service was still in its early stages. Houses, even of the wealthy, lacked many of the most basic facilities that we take for granted today. Yet this was an exciting time. There was a young Queen on the throne. There was a spirit of optimism and going forward, similar to what many of us remember over a hundred years later in the 1950s. Like all of our Scottish cities, Aberdeen was seeing considerable development. What were then suburbs were growing out to the west and there was a continuous increase in the**

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<sup>11</sup> Outline of short address given at 130<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Knox (Gerrard Street), Aberdeen on 28 March 1974.

<sup>12</sup> Right Rev George T H Reid, MC DD.

<sup>13</sup> Nor were there computers, video games or mobile phones!

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population of the inner city, in the area around this church, as more and more people came in from the rural areas seeking work. Not all of these social developments were good, of course.

There were also considerable developments in the church. In some ways the Disruption of 1843 and the formation of the Free Church that led to the foundation of this church was a tragedy in that it produced a damaging split which, even to this day, is not entirely healed. Yet it also produced positive results in encouraging the best of the evangelical tradition in Scotland.

A famous Scottish judge, Lord Cockburn expressed his admiration and respect for the many ministers who have left their secure income and manses to join the Free Church, even though he did not entirely agree with them. In his own words: *It is the most honourable fact for Scotland that its whole history supplies.*

When Rev John Stephen preached the first sermon in John Knox Free Church in 1844, he took his text from Isaiah 6: 22, *A little one shall become a thousand and a small one a strong nation, and the Lord will hasten it in His time.*

This evening, for this brief address, I want to take my text from the same chapter of Isaiah: *They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations. They shall repair the ruined cities, the desolation of many generations.*<sup>14</sup>

Now, I am not referring to the fairly obvious fact that the area surrounding this church has seen considerable demolition and clearance from the 1930s onwards. Nor am I, as your guest, suggesting that your church is a ruin! But I *am* suggesting that

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<sup>14</sup> Verse 4 (RSV)

there is a new generation growing up and plenty of challenges to be faced, especially for an inner city congregation, like this.

Encouraged by your past, the church of today can look at the present. I emphasise the present rather than the future as the future depends entirely on what we do now.

The most important time of the Christian church is always now, the present. We can learn lessons from and be encouraged by the past. The future is unknown and a blank page. *Sufficient unto the day* - and all that.

Let us not forget that there is much to encourage us. There are signs of growing interest especially among the younger generation in spiritual matters <sup>15</sup> such as has not been seen for many years. In this country we enjoy an amazing freedom to preach, share, teach and practice the Christian gospel. There does seem to be a genuine seeking in the hearts of many men and women.

Yet, so many of our Kirks are half full, or do I mean half empty? And there is a puzzling and frustrating lack of power in so much of our work and witness. I suggest that sometimes we don't really have sufficient confidence in what - or rather who - we stand for. And it is not just beliefs or moral codes or even church buildings and fellowships that we stand for. As Christians, we stand for Jesus Christ.

It is Jesus upon whom the Spirit of the Lord God rests to bring good tidings, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives, to comfort those who mourn, that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the land. To those who know Jesus Christ and are led by his Spirit are given the keys of the Kingdom.

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<sup>15</sup> This is forty years ago. Ministers were more optimistic at this time!  
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You do not need me to tell you that this is traditionally a missionary-minded church with a long and honourable record of evangelism and practical Christianity in our city. I am certain that it is the will of everyone here tonight that this should not just continue but also increase.

If it is to continue, it will not actually be through looking at the past, although the past always has some important lessons to teach us.

The priority will not be buildings, finance or administration - important as these factors may be. The priority will be to sustain a united and worshiping congregation with each member seeking to know Jesus Christ and to know him better each day.

If ever there was a time in our nation, in our city, in our work places and neighbourhoods for genuine grass roots Christian living and witness, it is surely now. There *are* devastations of many generations and there is much building to be done. But first of all, our own house must be in order and seen to be in order.

I wish all of you God's blessing at this happy time in your on-going history and pray that He will be pleased to use you greatly in the years that lie ahead.<sup>16</sup>

### Closing Prayer

Father we give thanks for the gift of prayer and for the truly wonderful way in which you have heard the prayers of your people in past days and throughout the generations.

We know, Father, that you also hear us today and so we ask that you will especially bless this fellowship of your people at this time of looking both backwards and forwards. We give

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<sup>16</sup> As a result of major unions and readjustments in the area, John Knox (Gerrard Street) ceased to be a separate congregation. The building has been used by a Baptist congregation since 1980.

thanks for the way in which you have blessed this church in the past, for happy memories and old associations.

We pray that you will bless its work now and in the future as it enters upon a new chapter in bringing the good news of the Gospel in word and deed to the people of this city.

We pray that this may be done in a spirit of joy and with the assurance that it is pleasing in your sight.

Give strength to the minister, office bearers and members that your Spirit may continue to lead and guide them in all that they seek to do. Bless us, our homes and our families that your name may always be honoured amongst us. These things we ask in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

## Stewardship <sup>17</sup>

Most people when they hear the word "stewardship" groan inwardly, believing that this is only to do with money and (even worse) that the church is always asking for it. During my time in ministry, I have been accused on a number of occasions of asking for money. Well, there are many things on which I could be faulted but actually I don't think this is one of them.

As I said to this congregation when I came here, there may be times when I *will* bring certain needs before you for prayerful consideration. It is up to you to respond in the way that seems appropriate to you. That is (to me) very different from asking for money. Maybe you see it differently?

Actually, the issues are very simple. All we have comes from God. God does not actually ask for it back, as the gifts of God are irrevocable. But he gives it to us in trust.

Under Old Testament Law, God was to be given a minimum of a tenth (a tenth) of everything. That sounds good. Of course, people can become obsessive. Jesus spoke of people who tithed dill and cumin and yet neglected the actual spirit of God's law. We now live under the New Covenant and need not be bound by the strict tenth. Does that mean then that we give more or less?

I have to point out the somewhat painful fact that we, as a congregation, have got to be able to pay our way. If we don't we cannot hope to survive, humanly speaking. There is no chest of gold in Edinburgh for us to tap in to.

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<sup>17</sup> Brief talk given to the Guild at Summerhill Parish Church, Aberdeen, 5 April 1978  
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But there are other ways of giving to God and these all need to be controlled by our worship. Worship of God and knowledge of his Word will lead us to service of others. But generally speaking service of others will not necessarily lead us to worship. Also a worldly-wise calculation of Christian giving may well give us the wrong answer.

It is often easier to give materially - especially when it will get the praise and admiration of men - than to share of ourselves.

Spiritual devotion will seldom be appreciated by other people - it may even be despised.

People thought that the widow's mite was too small but they thought that Mary's gift was too great. Their attitude was really the same, odd as that may sound. *"The world despised the widow's mite as too small while it criticised the anointing as wasteful, exhibitionist and unrealistic."*<sup>18</sup>

*This is a helpful warning to us to beware of over close, worldly wise calculation in church affairs. What was said about the value of the ointment and the need of the poor was true - but the Lord looks for un-calculating wealth of devotion rather than a fine wisdom and balanced judgment in giving. The Lord loves a cheerful giver, not a careful one."*

Our whole attitude to giving, whether it be money, time or talents depends on our attitude to God and to what God has done and does in Jesus Christ.

Judas had been with Jesus from the very beginning of his ministry. Yet his heart was hardened in such a way that he deprecated devotion to Jesus by saying that the money could

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<sup>18</sup> I have mislaid the source of this quotation.

have been spent on something better. Yet he himself was dipping in to the funds for which he was responsible and would eventually betray his Master for thirty pieces of silver.

In considering our stewardship, let us all (and that includes me) ensure that we are not carried away by love of the world which ruined Judas and which made him despise an action of costly devotion and love which, as long as the Gospel is preached will be told in memory of one whose love was constant and true.

## Martha and Mary <sup>19</sup>

Scripture Readings: *Luke 10: 38-41; John 12: 1-7*

It is always a dangerous, even foolhardy, venture to speak to a company of ladies on the subject of women. Already I am treading on fragile ground by alternating between *ladies* and *women*. My great grandmother who had the reputation of being a bit of a hot-head once walked out of a Guild meeting in Turriff because she felt patronised when a "Ladies' Choir" came to sing to the "women" of the Guild. So, I feel a certain difficulty although I would rather not go for the "female person" alternative.

Let me also say that over many centuries, men in the church have managed to dismiss or patronise the contribution of women amazingly effectively. We are steadily moving towards a time of equal rights and opportunities for men and women.<sup>20</sup> Does the church need to catch up - or does the church need to go back to its roots and see what the practices actually were in the early church? We may get some surprises as we look at this question further. Anyway, do we always have to go back to the practices of the early church, assuming that they give us a template of perfection?

Of course, there are some people who would say that church is really a women's organisation already. There is no doubt that their contribution to the Church of Scotland at all levels is not only substantial but also crucial. In so many ways, it is the women-folk who keep the show on the road.

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<sup>19</sup> This is a talk given at a couple of Guild meetings in the mid-to-late 1970s. It does not pretend to be an exhaustive treatment of the ministry of women.

<sup>20</sup> Remember that this is the 1970s and statutory equal rights were not fully developed.

Where I find most difficulty is in knowing whether the distinctive and complementary roles of men and women are something to be encouraged or not. My inclination is to say that they should be, since men and women are created different even although of equal status and worth in the sight of God. In other words, we are not just male or female persons. Also, both ministry and eldership are available to men and women on an equal basis.<sup>21</sup>

In Genesis 2:20, Eve is referred to as a *helper*<sup>22</sup> to Adam which seems to hint at a subordinate role. Yet in the Hebrew tradition a mother (and the Hebrew tradition did not think in terms of bachelors or spinsters) was to be:

- Honoured (Exodus 20: 12)
- Feared (Leviticus 19: 3)
- Obeyed (Deuteronomy 21: 18)

Men and women were expected to be married, and to be married within their tribe. Women could attend religious gatherings but had to be separate from the men. This is still the case today in Orthodox Jewish synagogues. A woman could inherit property, but only if there were no male heirs, so it was still very much a man's world. For women, monogamy was the ideal state. It was not easy when men could have more than one wife, as in the earlier Old Testament times. Women were expected to bear children. For a woman to be "barren" was, very harshly, seen as a disgrace.

If we think of women in the Old Testament, some of the goodies who come to mind are:

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<sup>21</sup> Women were admitted to the eldership in 1966 and to the ministry in 1968. The first woman minister in Scotland was May Winchester, ordained at the Partick Church of the Nazarene in 1912.

<sup>22</sup> RSV translation

Miriam  
Deborah  
Ruth

And the bad guys include:

Delilah  
Jezebel

All of these could make fascinating studies in themselves.

In the world into which Jesus was born, women had a rather rough time in many ways. It had become very easy for a Jewish man to divorce an inconvenient wife. Widows and divorced women had to rely basically on family charity. If a Jewish man was walking along the street and his wife was coming in the opposite direction, he would not normally acknowledge or even recognise her!

Although the Christian church is often portrayed as being somewhat behind the times in its attitude to women, the real truth is that Jesus revolutionised the status of women, largely because he talked to so many of them, which was unheard of for a Jewish rabbi.

Jesus was born of Mary, who is described as being "blessed among women". He had encounters with such diverse characters as Peter's mother-in-law, the woman who came out of the crowd, the syro-phoenician woman, the women at the well and many others. Most of all, he spent a lot of time with Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus at their home at Bethany. I want to come back to Martha and Mary in a moment.

Jesus then had many encounters with women – he forgave them, healed and taught them and they in turn made provision for his journeys, gave him hospitality and extended other deeds of love.

It was women who stood at the foot of the cross, came to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus and were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

So the attitude of Jesus toward women was certainly revolutionary. He gave them a new status. They were clearly offered the Gospel in exactly the same way as men.

In the early church, the women were with the men in prayer and supplication with the other followers of Jesus in active fellowship with them.<sup>23</sup> They were among those who received the gifts of the Holy Spirit. It was (probably) in the home of John Mark's mother that this took place and it became a centre for the young church in Jerusalem.

Paul's first convert in Europe was Lydia, a seller of purple goods.<sup>24</sup> Priscilla, along with her husband (note the order of priority) taught Apollos the full truths of the Gospel.<sup>25</sup>

There are a great many influential women in the history of the church of the first few centuries, including a very impressive array of martyrs. There were certainly many holy women in the Celtic Church. At the great Synod of Whitby in 644 AD, Saint Hilda the formidable Abbess of Whitby, sat next to the King of Northumbria and was clearly a trusted scholar, advisor and confidante. There was considerable learning and scholarship in the many convents and monasteries that existed throughout what we are pleased to call the "Dark Ages". When learning moved out

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<sup>23</sup> Acts 1: 14

<sup>24</sup> Acts 16: 14

<sup>25</sup> Acts 18: 26

of such places into the universities, which were only open to men, this was a great set-back to women. Even now, few people would see a nunnery or a convent as a place of learning and scholarship.

There is no time to speak of other influential women such as Hildegard of Bingen, Teresa of Avilla and Joan of Arc - and a great many others. I want to turn back now to Martha and Mary and look at them more closely.

### Martha

There is only one person of that name in the Bible, which comes as somewhat of a relief.<sup>26</sup> She was the sister of Mary<sup>27</sup> and Lazarus (who was raised from the dead). All three seemed to live together in a house at Bethany. She seems to have operated as head of hospitality in the household. This would have been a relatively affluent home. Bethany was about two miles from Jerusalem and would today count as a desirable residential area. There is no record of Martha being married, although spinsters were unusual at this time. She could have been a widow, but we just do not know.

It says that she was "cumbered with much serving" - and the scholars can tell us that the root meaning behind the words gives a sense of being dragged around. In Scotland we would say she was "trauchled". She could not get done all the things she wanted to do as a good hostess, so she got angry with her sister Mary and then with Jesus.

Yet, when her brother Lazarus died, it was Martha who went out to speak to Jesus. Do not make the mistake of thinking that because she was busy and efficient, she was unspiritual. It is interesting too to see in the next chapter, it says "Martha

<sup>26</sup> Luke 10: 38, John 11: 1, 5, 19-39, 12: 2

<sup>27</sup> Matthew 26: 6, Mark 14: 3-9, John 11: 1-44, 12: 1-8

served".<sup>28</sup> She was still getting on with her job but maybe now she saw things in a better proportion. She always wanted to do her best for Jesus. Jesus did not for a moment object to the many things that she did; but he did point gently to the one thing that had been forgotten.

And it certainly does not mean that it is always more spiritual to sit around. I know of some Christians who genuinely believe that the more services, Bible studies and prayer meetings they clock up by attendance, the more spiritual they will be. It reminds me of the indulgences and merits against which Martin Luther preached. However, worship, teaching and prayer *are* very important; it is matter of balance.

### Mary

Although less is said about Mary at this point, she is, in many ways, a much more complex character. One of the obvious problems is that Mary is a common name and it is not always easy to know which one we are looking at. She is normally identified with the woman who anointed Jesus. However, there are accounts of anointing in all four Gospels<sup>29</sup> and it is difficult to fit them all neatly together.

The four accounts have in common the fact that the event took place in a house, at a meal and was carried out by a woman. In every account, someone objects. Matthew, Mark and John all identify the event as taking place in Bethany. Mark and Mathew record that the ointment was poured over the head of Jesus. John and Luke say that it was poured over his feet and that the women wiped them with her hair. (Are you still with me?)

Mathew and Mark simply state that it was a "woman" whereas Luke described her as a sinner, taken to imply that she was a

<sup>28</sup> John 12: 2

<sup>29</sup> Matthew 26: 6-13, Mark 14: 3-9, Luke 7: 39-50. John 12: 1-8.

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prostitute. John alone identifies her as Mary of Bethany. Matthew and Mark state that this took place in the home of Simon the Leper, whereas Luke says it took place in the house of Simon the Pharisee. Although John identifies the event as taking place in Bethany, no particular house is mentioned.

Are there two events here or only one? The scholars argue and the truth may never be known. I take this little digression to show just how difficult it can be to make positive identifications of some characters of the Gospels. In mediaeval times, a conflated Mary appeared who seemed to be a mixture of the unnamed women in Luke's Gospel, Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene.<sup>30</sup> The ancient wrong, going back to the time of Pope Gregory the Great, that identified Mary Magdalene as a repentant prostitute has been corrected in modern times but still lives on in popular perception.

In any event, Mary of Bethany knew that devotion to Jesus demanded more than service alone. We can get lost sometimes (and this applies to ministers just as much as lay people) in church affairs and good works and yet to forget our relationship with Jesus Christ. Mary could see just that bit further than her well intentioned and competent sister Martha. There is the wonderful little addition that wherever the Gospel is preached, the story of her devotion will be told.

*As I ponder the story of Mary, the feeling of my heart is that I would rather be in succession to her than the whole company of the apostles. (G Campbell Morgan)*

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<sup>30</sup> Some modern scholars still believe that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are one and the same.

**Contrast the two women.**

**They were alike in that both:**

- **Believed**
- **Had been converted**
- **Honoured Jesus**
- **Broke convention**
- **Did not radically change yet both went a stage further in their spiritual journey**
- 

**But they were also very different**

- **Martha is portrayed as loving, honest, active, competent, impatient, someone who said what she thought. When she saw Jesus, she wanted to do something - but one thing still was needful.**
- **Mary is portrayed as being more thoughtful, with deep feelings but not so ready to express them in words nor was she as practical as her sister.**

**Are you Martha or Mary? (Circle as appropriate)**

- 1. The Minister calls one afternoon when your living room is in a state of considerable untidiness. Do you (A) ask him into the living room which, though untidy, is warm and comfortable or (B) show him into the "best room" which is tidy but decidedly chilly?**
  
- 2. It is time to leave for church and there is a pile of dirty dishes in the sink. Would you (A) rather leave the dishes where they are until your return or (B) stop and wash the dishes even though this will make you late for church?**
  
- 3. An old friend whom you haven't seen for a long time arrives unexpectedly. In the circumstances, you can either excuse yourself or go to prepare a meal and get the bed ready etc or you can sit with her and catch up with all the news of family and friends. Clearly, you cannot do both. Would you prefer to (A) see that she is fed and comfortable or (B) remain and chat with her and leave meals and beds until later?**
  
- 4. If you are separated for a time from someone dear to you, perhaps by his/her going into hospital, are you (A) comforted by being told that it won't be long until he/she is back with you again or (B) more upset because of the present loss?**
  
- 5. You have invited a close friend over for lunch and a chin-wag on one o'clock one Friday when you know you have the house to yourself. Your friend turns up nearly an hour late; do you say (A) "Why didn't you come in time?" or (B) "I wish you could have come on time."**

## Suggested Scoring:

1. A = Mary, B = Martha
2. A = Mary, B = Martha
3. A = Martha, B = Mary
4. A = Mary, B = Martha
5. A = Martha, B = Mary

### Addendum:

In recent years, due to the popularity of Dan Brown's pot-boiler novel "The Da Vinci Code" and the subsequent film, a great deal of interest has been revived in the "European heresy" which suggests that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that there are descendants of Jesus alive today, especially in the royal lines of Europe.<sup>31</sup>

I personally tend to the view that Mary of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are one and the same person but it is not an issue on which anyone can really be dogmatic.

The French "underground" tradition is that Mary, her brother Lazarus, and Maximin, one of the Seventy Disciples and some companions, expelled from Palestine by persecution, crossed the Mediterranean in a frail boat with neither rudder nor mast and landed at the place now called *Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* near Arles, in the Provence region of southern France.

Mary Magdalene, it is said, then came to Marseille and converted the whole of Provence. She is said to have retired to a cave on a hill near Marseille, called La Sainte-Baume ("holy cave"), where she gave herself up to a life of penance for thirty years, never cutting her hair during that period. There is a body of writing on Mary Magdalene to be found in the New Testament Apocrypha Gnostic texts, especially the Gospel of Mary, Gospel of Philip, Gospel of Thomas and Pistis Sophia.<sup>32</sup>

A group of modern scholars, the most notable of whom is the Princeton scholar Elaine Pagels, have suggested that Mary Magdalene was actually a leader of the early Church and that her contribution was suppressed, because she was a woman. These scholars have even suggested that Mary might even be the unidentified "Beloved Disciple" to whom the Gospel of John is ascribed. Scholars in the tradition of Rudolph Steiner's (anthroposophy) teachings identify Lazarus of Bethany (her brother, if my perception is correct) as being the beloved disciple. Some strands of the tradition include Lazarus as one of the companions in the boat. The mysterious "Black Madonna" shrines

<sup>31</sup> *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail*, Michael Baigent and others

<sup>32</sup> *Bloodline of the Holy Grail*, Laurence Gardner

that are found throughout Europe *may* represent Mary Magdalene, rather than the Virgin Mary, although that view is highly controversial.<sup>33</sup> Some familiar European fairy tales may even contain hidden references to Mary Magdalene.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth pointing out that, at the time of Jesus, it was unthinkable, possibly even impossible for a Jewish Rabbi, like himself, to be unmarried. It is true that the New Testament does not say that Jesus was married. Equally it does not say that he was unmarried. The latter would certainly have been noteworthy in the culture and tradition within which he lived.

The traditional understanding of the church presents a strangely sexless Jesus – born of a perpetual virgin, himself celibate and friendly with a bachelor Lazarus and his two spinster sisters. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church traditionally teaches that Jesus' brothers and sisters were the children of Joseph by a previous marriage. This all has a strangely unconvincing ring to it. This celibate and male dominated interpretation has allowed men in the church to suppress or patronise the place of women. Indeed, I would be bold enough to suggest that the Christian tradition has been impeded by its lack of the Divine Feminine.

It does explain to some extent why the Roman church has such devotion to the Virgin Mary, borrowing from the ancient Isis tradition by naming her Queen of Heaven and Our Lady Star of the Sea. At one stage, Pope John Paul II seriously considered naming the Virgin Mary as co-redemptrix with Jesus Christ. Fortunately, he did not do so but it is not difficult to see why he wished to.

I remember at one General Assembly (early 1980s?) when a representative of the Guild prayed in the name of "God our mother". There was a predictable negative reaction (mainly, of course, from men).

In spite of the negative reaction of some in the traditional church to the notion that Jesus might have been married, most ordinary Christians seem unfazed at the prospect and do not regard it as in any way undermining their faith. Interestingly, the view that Jesus was married is believed to have been accepted by the Cathars of southern France, who were dreadfully persecuted and slaughtered at the hands of the Catholic Church in the guise of the so-called Albigensian Crusade in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was a dreadful event and a blot on the history of the Christian church, part of that terrible period known popularly as "The Inquisition".

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<sup>33</sup> *Mary Magdale*, Lynn Picknett

<sup>34</sup> *The Woman with the Alabaster Jar*, Margaret Starbird

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## Feeding the Five Thousand <sup>35</sup>

*Text: Luke 9: 10-17*

We see Jesus in many different situations and all of them are very human. He went to weddings and funerals. He ate and drank with people of all backgrounds and classes. He fell asleep on a boat. He staged a getaway when there were too many crowds and he went to a picnic.

This account of the feeding of the 5,000 must be one of the stories of Jesus that I remember away back to my earliest days in Sunday School. I wondered how Jesus did it, in the way that children do. If children see or hear of something unusual happening, they want to know more. They also believe what they are told and what they see.

At this stage, I was told that this was a real miracle (which it is). Jesus did something amazing. Just like Moses had fed the children of Israel with manna in the wilderness, so like a new Moses he was showing God's new provision. To put this in another way, it was a purely miraculous and spiritual event. Jesus worked miracles. That was what Jesus did. So there was no problem.

Then when I was at secondary school, I heard a different explanation which I found quite disturbing at the time. It was suggested that what had actually happened was that people had brought their own food with them, but no one wanted to let on in case they had to share. To put it another way, they had their sandwiches up their jumpers! When one or two people started to eat, others brought out the food they had been hiding and gradually began to share with one another. It sounded plausible and I found it rather disturbing.

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<sup>35</sup> Undated address.

So, now I seemed to be faced with two competing alternatives – or that is how it seemed (to me). On the one hand, some people were saying that this was a spiritual and miraculous event which, like all the miracles of Jesus were a manifestation of his glory. On the other hand there were those who said it was really just an example of how important it is to share and that this is the logical and rational explanation. No need for a miracle.

Well, when it is put in such a simple way and polarised way, it seems that we have to choose one or the other. But actually, I do not find either explanation on its own to be entirely convincing. To me it is not a case of “either or” – it’s more a case of “both and”.

I suggest that the traditional view that this was a miraculous event *is* correct. And I agree that there was a real hidden significance in paralleling Jesus as Saviour under the New Covenant with Moses under the Old. But I suggest that there is also real truth in the fact that people were moved to share. What I tended to miss – and I suggest many people miss – is how much was left over. There was actually more food at the meal than people had brought. That takes a bit of thinking about. The sharing had opened up a channel for God’s blessing and his provision.

These two explanations are not in conflict. Actually, in the everyday situation the miraculous and the ordinary come together so closely that sometimes you can hardly see the join. Those who have eyes to see, see it.

Miracles require faith. When Jesus went to Capernaum, we are told he could do no mighty works there because of peoples’ unbelief. And part of the belief is being willing to see God at work.

Early in the last World War, Hitler pushed across north France leaving hundreds of men stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk. The king, George VI called for a national day of prayer. It was a more deferential society and people trooped out obediently to church. You know the rest of the story. Hundreds of men were rescued in the course of a remarkable operation. People who lived on the south coast said they had never seen the English Channel so calm. Winston Churchill - with considerable justification - called it a "miracle of deliverance".

Of course, some people would say that it would have happened anyway. Maybe it would; maybe it wouldn't. That is a question of faith. I can't prove it but neither can anyone disprove it.

And let me suggest that when people are willing to share, everything *does* seem to go further. Any minister or missionary will tell you how far money seems to go in God's work. People can say it's not a miracle at all - but that's a matter of perception. If I could prove something was a miracle, it would not be a miracle. If I could prove that there was a totally rational explanation, then it also would not be a miracle. As it is, there is always an element of faith in any miracle. And there are always plenty of people who carry out fake miracles. When Moses stood before Pharaoh he threw down his staff and it became a serpent. Pharaoh's magicians immediately said "We can do that one!"

Theologians speak about discernment which in itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Jesus never forced himself on anyone. He left it open for people to make their own decisions and see what they want to see. What do you want to see?



## Who was John the Baptist? <sup>36</sup>

Reading: *Matthew 11: 1-19*

The name "John" derives from a Hebrew term signifying "God is gracious." He was known familiarly as "the Baptist" to differentiate him from other Johns in the New Testament. There are also a confusing number of people called James and Mary. John is a somewhat scary character in many ways. I don't think he would have been the easiest house guest nor, I suggest, would you have easily addressed him as "Jack".

The importance of John in the divine scheme of things probably is summed up best in the testimony of Jesus himself. "Among them that are born of women there has not arisen a greater than John the Baptist . . ." <sup>37</sup>

John was the son of elderly Jewish parents named Zacharias and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was related to Mary, the mother of Jesus. This devout couple lived in the "hill country" of Judea, somewhere around Hebron.

We know from Luke's Gospel that John was about six months older than Jesus.<sup>38</sup> It was foretold that this child would be filled with the Spirit of God, even from birth, and that he would be reared under the strict code of the Nazirites <sup>39</sup> who were well known Jewish mystics and ascetics.

Any Jewish person familiar with his Old Testament could have expected the ministry of someone like John as a preliminary

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<sup>36</sup> Undated address

<sup>37</sup> Matthew 11: 11

<sup>38</sup> Luke 1: 26

<sup>39</sup> Numbers 6: 1-21

measure in the divine plan, paving the way for the appearance of the Messiah. Note the following.

Seven centuries before the birth of Jesus, the prophet Isaiah spoke of “the voice of one that cries ‘Prepare in the wilderness the way of the Lord’” and “Make level in the desert a highway for our God”.<sup>40</sup> With the coming of Jesus, these words spring to life again with deeper and fuller meaning. John, therefore, was a key figure in the preparation of the Messiah's work.

In the last book of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi says: “Behold, I send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple; and the Messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, behold he comes, says the Lord.” Malachi later refers to this “messenger” as “Elijah the prophet”.<sup>41</sup> In the New Testament this “Elijah” to come was seen as none other than John.

The description of John is brief and stark. He was arrayed in a “camel's hair” garment, secured by a leather belt, and his diet was locusts and wild honey.

John was somewhat reclusive. Jesus once said: “John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He has a demon”.<sup>42</sup> “Eating and drinking” stood for socializing. The prophet was not a party-goer. His ascetic life-style appeared almost demonic, like the mentally ill people who apparently frequented the desolate areas. He did not seek out the multitudes; rather, somehow, he attracted them.

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<sup>40</sup> Isaiah 40: 3

<sup>41</sup> Malachi 4: 4-5

<sup>42</sup> Matthew 11: 18-19

The citizens of Jerusalem and all Judea went out to him as he moved about in the Jordan Valley. After several centuries of silence, the voice of the prophet was, once again, heard in the land.

John's mission can be summed up by one word, "preparer." It was his great calling to prepare a people for the coming Messiah. Both Isaiah and Malachi had announced that he would "prepare" the way for the coming of the Lord

John provided excellent witness to the nature of Christ. As the prophet began to generate attention, certain Jews in Jerusalem dispatched to him a delegation of priests and Levites in order to ascertain his identity. John emphatically stated that he was not the promised Messiah, rather, he was the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, the voice of preparation for the arrival of God in the flesh. The declaration of John that he was unworthy to unloose the thongs of his sandals <sup>43</sup> was stunning testimony indeed - with obvious implications. In the Gospel of John, John the Baptist characterized Jesus as "the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world". <sup>44</sup>

We know what happened to John. Herod held him in prison - and yet was fascinated by him. On his birthday, Herod was beguiled into granting his daughter in law a wish after she danced a strip tease for him and his unsavoury crew. So, she asked for the head of John the Baptist. With his execution, obviously, John disappears from the scene.

Prophets are not just people who tell the future - they also tell it as it is now and what God wants of us now. People will never be pleased with prophets. Jesus himself said that a prophet has

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<sup>43</sup> Mark 1:7

<sup>44</sup> John 1: 29

no honour in his own country.<sup>45</sup> Actually society in general does not like too much truth. Truth will make you free but first it may make you miserable.

People are fickle in matters of religion (and in most issues) and that has not changed. Some people complained about John because he found him a bit too much - just too extreme with his wild appearance and seemingly extravagant language about broods of vipers and the wrath to come. But the same people who complained about John also complained about Jesus. In contrast to John, Jesus seemed too liberal and was over fond of eating and drinking. We need to remember that the most important thing is to please God and not just other people.

People play their part in the bigger picture. We seldom live to see all that we might like to see. As I get older, like most people I have a few regrets. If only I had taken that opportunity. If only I hadn't done that. Also, as we get older, there is the tendency to feel that we maybe haven't had the influence or success we might have wished. Well look at John. It seemed as though his mission had been a failure. How could he be a success when he was dead? People living in this part of Scotland look with pride at the legacy of David Livingstone. He endured incredible hardship in his medical work, in his spreading of the Gospel and his battle for the abolition of slavery. Historians argue as to how many converts he actually had - was it one or none? The London Missionary Society actually withdrew their support from him at one stage because they thought he was not getting sufficient converts. In this respect, Livingstone died a disappointed man. Yet he did plant a real seed - and the church in Malawi to this day acknowledges its debt to Livingstone even though he has been in his grave for 140 years.

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<sup>45</sup> John 4: 39-45

## Parable of the Growing Seed <sup>46</sup>

Text: *Mark 4: 21-33*

*"The parable of the growing seed"*<sup>47</sup> which formed the middle part of our reading, has also been called the parable of *"hidden seed"* or one of *"unconscious growth."* Some have even referred to this parable as the story of *"secret growth"* and, of course, a great deal of God's work is actually secret in that we often do not know about it or don't see it - even when it is staring us in the face.

This parable, unusually, appears only in the Gospel of Mark. We might consider this parable as an expansion of the story of what happens to the seed that *"fell on good ground"*.<sup>48</sup> It is also a parable that complements the illustration (that we read) that no man would put a candle under a bushel or under his bed.

The scholars can tell us that the word for *bushel* used here was originally of Latin origin and in this context means a container that can hold that measure, i.e. a bushel, of dry goods, usually grain. Such a container was normally made of pottery and if inverted over a candle would quickly stifle the flame for lack of oxygen. Placing the candle under a bed would be even more foolish, since that would not only diminish the light, but would also incur the strong possibility of igniting the bedding, which in those days was usually made of dried straw. The purpose of a candle is to provide light; hiding it, or putting it where it is potentially dangerous or inflammatory, would be utter foolishness.

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<sup>46</sup> Undated address

<sup>47</sup> Mark 4: 26-29

<sup>48</sup> Mark 4: 8

The metaphor for *light* is familiar. Sometimes it means Jesus himself when he said "I am the light of the world".<sup>49</sup> At other times light stands in contrast to darkness. Sometimes it seems to refer to God's guidance through Scripture and his presence through the Holy Spirit.

Light, of course, will only be useful if it can be clearly seen. A light in the next room is of no use if we are sitting in darkness. Even light has to be used wisely.

We sometimes make qualitative judgments on to whom, or where, we should aim the "light" of the gospel only to be proven completely wrong in our assessments at some later time.

A number of years ago, a farmer in North Carolina heard that a distinguished evangelist was to be visiting the nearby town. He was very keen to take some of the young people of the area with him - but there was a problem. He had to convince one young man who was very much the "leader of the pack" to come. He was a farm boy of about 17, blond haired, good looking. If he went, the other young folk would go. If he didn't, they wouldn't! Simple! But the young man was not at all interested, that is until the farmer had a brainwave. Would the young man come if he was allowed to drive the truck? Ah well, that was different!

So, for several nights on end, the party went into the town. The young man sat at the very back of the church with his arms folded and wearing a sullen expression. On the very last night, following the Southern Baptist tradition, people who wanted to give their lives to Christ were invited to step forward - and to everyone's astonishment, this same young man was first on his feet. The young farm boy's name was Billy Graham - the future Dr Billy Graham who has preached the gospel to more people and

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<sup>49</sup> John 8: 12

in more countries than anyone else in the entire history of the Christian church.

And the story does not end there. Billy Graham is now an old man and in poor health. The main thrust of his work is now carried on by his son, Franklin. Nothing unusual about that, is there? Well no. Except that for many years, Franklin was regarded at the black sheep of the family. He had no time for this religion stuff and he resented that his father was so often away from home. Yet what really brought him round was the fact that his father never treated him differently from any of the others. He never nagged him or tried to force his hand - but never gave up on him either.

I think we all know people - maybe within our own family, or circle of friends and acquaintances - who seem unpromising. They don't want any of this religion stuff; they don't want to come to church or read some old Bible. And these people are a constant challenge. The easiest thing is to give up on them and assume they are hopeless cases - or to go to the other extreme and suggest that they will only be acceptable to us when they do and think as we do.

But God is not always in the same hurry as we are.

There are countless similar stories of people who have started out looking very unpromising. And, of course, we can all fall into this trap. It is easy to write people off. Yet sometimes it is the less likely people that surprise us.

Of course, this process does require patience and discernment. We will never nag people into the Kingdom of Heaven nor even convince them with our wonderful logic. But we will never convince them either if we do not witness in any way - if we hide

our light under a bushel or if we do the opposite and use in an argumentative or inflammatory way. As the good book says "There is a time to speak and there is a time to be silent".<sup>50</sup>

And finally we need to remember that the work of the kingdom is indeed mysterious and much of it is unseen and secret. We don't see plants and seeds growing under the ground and yet every year up they come! Fortunately, in the kingdom, it is not all up to us and to our human effort.

It is God who tends to the growing and will reap the harvest. We cannot of ourselves "will" anyone into the kingdom. Nor can we decide who may, or may not, be worthy of our preaching efforts. We may be unaware of some who are already part of the kingdom, failing to recognize them because of our own presuppositions.

When some children came to Jesus, the disciples wanted to send them away. But Jesus rebuked them - he pointed at the children and said, in the famous words: "...for of such is the kingdom of heaven".<sup>51</sup> There is a very ancient tradition that a future famous leader and martyr in the early church, Ignatius of Antioch, was one of those children whom Jesus blessed.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "*I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow*".<sup>52</sup> Yes, we can (and should) do as much as possible to plant and to water - but finally we can leave the actual growing to God.

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<sup>50</sup> Ecclesiastes 3: 1-15

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 19: 14

<sup>52</sup> I Corinthians 3: 6 NIV