

FROM THE MANSE

Dear Friends,

I was talking to an older colleague recently and we reflected on the challenges the Church is facing in Scotland today. We discussed how prior to the present pandemic the challenges were considerable and now, in some senses, they are even greater. In the course of our conversation my colleague said something that is so obvious and yet somehow it made an impression on me and has remained with me, *'Whatever else we do....we must keep the faith.'*

This, in essence, is the message of the letter to the Hebrews, part of which we have just read. Further on in Chapter 11 we read of people who lived by faith and for whom faith was integral to their life. Something those mentioned had in common is the fact that every one of them swam, as it were, against the current of their time, and every one of them was commended for their faith.

Enoch walked with God. Noah, warned of things not then seen, built an ark. And Moses persevered despite Pharaoh's anger. All that and more they did because of their faith, a faith that motivated them and ensured that even in the most trying of circumstances, they did not lose heart.

For the congregation of St Ninians Old, today is known as Kirk O'Muir Sunday, the Sunday when the service in the Old Parish is at 10am and then we gather at Kirk O'Muir, in a remote part of the parish, for an open air service at 12 noon. Unfortunately, due to restrictions currently in place, we are unable to be there this year, but we can still draw inspiration and encouragement from those who, in ancient times, gathered in that special place. They became known as Covenanters and were determined to defend Presbyterianism and to oppose state interference in spiritual matters. Because of the stand they had taken they were forced to gather in the hills to worship God, and even though many of them were sent to the gallows, those whose lives were spared remained true to their cause.

Here is what one commentator wrote;

'The scaffold could not daunt them. Instruments of torture could not make them quail. The sufferings and discomforts of cave or moor or prison cell could not move them to act and speak against their conscience; the love of Christ shed abroad in their hearts ever spurred them on to do and to suffer.'

Like those mentioned in the letter to the Hebrews, they kept the faith and are to be commended for it.

What a legacy and what an inspiration for us today!

It has been said *'It is easy to worship but it is tough to follow.'* Being a member of the church and having your name on a congregational roll does not, for many, require much by way of commitment these days, but following Jesus, seeking to live our lives the way he asks us too is an altogether different matter.

He calls us to live the way of love, to be forgiving and to show compassion. He calls on us to take a stand against that which is wrong and he summons us to speak up for those who have no voice and to challenge injustice wherever we see it, despite the cost to ourselves.

The old hymn puts it well; *'Seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee.'* One of the ways in which we can praise God is to live out our faith in our daily lives, our prayer being that others when they look at us will see something of Jesus in us, and that come what may, we will not be deflected from the path he has set before us.

When William Wilberforce, a man of faith, headed the parliamentary campaign against the British slave trade, he was ostracised and shunned by many but he continued, year after year, until 1807 when his bill was finally passed by Parliament. In later years he campaigned for the complete abolition of slavery. Again he faced great opposition for the stand he had taken. At one point when the cause seemed hopeless Wilberforce received a letter from John Wesley, the father of Methodism. It was, like the letter to the Hebrews, a letter of encouragement. Here is a quote from it;

'If God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them, them who deride you, stronger than God? Be not weary in well doing. Go on, go on in the name of God and in the power of his might.'

Wesley's words were a summons to faith and faith by its very nature is tough. It does not dehumanise us or make us immune from the sufferings and sorrows of this earthly life, but it strengthens us, it motivates us and drives us on and if, in these challenging times for the Church, we keep the faith, well one day, as the writer to the Hebrews declared, we will be commended for it!

Every blessing,

Your Friend and Minister,

Gary J McIntyre