

15th May, 2016.

Reading: Acts 2: 22 -24, 36 - 41

Sermon: Malawi – God centred

Greetings are sent to you from our brothers and sisters in Christ in Kasamba congregation, genuine heartfelt greetings. To them, the partnership they have with the Mid-Argyll Churches is so meaningful. To them, we are truly part of their Church.

The Rev Custom Kapombe joked that our Churches in Mid-Argyll were a vestry, a worshipping community, of Kasamba congregation, of what he called the Mother Church. That was his way of saying how much a part of the Church of which he is Moderator, he felt we were.

To help you understand, Kasamba congregation has one main place of worship which is the Church building which I preached in on my first Sunday in Lilongwe. What an amazing experience that was.

At the English service, they have an attendance of between 700 and 800 people, many of whom walk for an hour and quarter to get to Church. I think I'm doing well when I walk to Margaret's round the corner. There are only about half a dozen cars parked in the grounds of the Church.

Following the English service, there is the Chichewa service, again with a large attendance and at both services, there are several choirs which sing and dance in praise of God.

While those services are happening, there are services taking place in the different vestries which are led by elders and by evangelists belonging to the congregation but who live in those particular communities.

Desiree who was part of the group which visited Mid-Argyll leads one such vestry, Thanthwe. Those vestries, those worshipping communities, are part of Kasamba Congregation until such time as they are considered to be large enough and strong enough to sustain their own ministry and then they stand alone. Thanthwe is almost ready to do that.

Bearing in mind that Kasamba congregation is only ten years old, it was quite amazing for us to see that the Church is growing at such an incredible speed. Looking at what seems like stagnation in our Churches, it's no wonder they see us as a vestry of the Mother Church because in their eyes and in the eyes of those of us who were there, we really need the support of that Mother Church.

In their eyes, we would not be sustainable. We would not be able to stand on our own two feet. Indeed, none of the Churches in Mid-Argyll would have a minister in their own right, nor indeed would many Church of Scotland congregations. The reality is that many Church of Scotland congregations, including our own, are barely sustainable and won't be sustainable for many more years unless we get a bit of what those growing Churches in Malawi have got.

So what is it that they have got? What is it that makes their Church so strong while we struggle to keep our heads above water? What is it that causes their Churches to grow at such an amazing rate while our numbers dwindle and while many in our congregations, who claim to be members, stay away?

That congregation of Kasamba is alive. It is on fire and that fire is spreading as it did in the early Church. What is evident in the people of that congregation is their faith. They have a strong faith in the risen Lord Jesus. They believe in a God who can move mountains as opposed to a God who just blows the dust.

They believe that God is good which should be easy for us to say. We have everything money can buy. We have free health care. We have free education. We have shops full of food. We have comfortable homes. We have cars. We have clean water. We have clothes to wear and far more than we need.

We have so much but how often in our Churches and in our communities do we hear people say that God is good? It does happen here but that message rang out so loud and clear in the first twenty-four hours that I was in Lilongwe that I had to rewrite my sermon for the Sunday morning.

Not only did the sun shine around us but the Son, the Son of God, shone out of the individuals in that congregation. It was so powerful to experience that I preached on the passage we use at Christmas from Isaiah chapter 9.

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light. On those living in a land of deep darkness, a light has dawned.

We are the ones who are living in a land of deep darkness, not just because of the cloud cover which is often over Argyll but because of the cloud that hangs over us, the cloud of negativity, the cloud of dissatisfaction, the cloud of 'every man for himself', the cloud of self-

reliance.

We have so much and yet so often we take it all for granted. We have so much that in many ways, our people see no need for God. In our land, we seldom acknowledge God let alone that God is good and yet we have been blessed so richly. We are well off and yet we are poorer than the Malawians who have next to nothing. That light dawned on me as I experienced the faith of those people in our God.

They have riches in heaven while we store up riches on earth, riches which moths and vermin destroy and where thieves break in and steal. Jesus said: **Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also** and that is what we witness in this land of darkness.

The Malawians are rich beyond compare and I hope and pray that they never become like us. They know that God is good but not only that. They believe that God has blessed them, that God blesses them on a daily basis and they are so grateful, so thankful, so humble and so generous.

When we look at the story of the 10 lepers who came to Jesus for healing, the Malawians are the ones who received from Jesus and who came back to say thank you. We are the ones who took and who walked away and we still do. We are greedy, grasping, self-centred people in the west. We are a people who demand our rights and who give little thought to our responsibilities.

We don't know the meaning of poverty in this country. I heard an interview on the radio on Monday as I drove home. The interviewer was talking to a man about Finnieston and what was needed there to make it more attractive to visitors.

They spoke of street cafes and of bars. When the interviewer said that only the well off would go to those places, the interviewee disagreed. He said he went to such places and he wasn't well off.

When the interview ended, the interviewer said that was so and so, a surveyor. My reaction was get a grip. You're not well off? We don't even know that we are well off in this country. How sad is that?

We don't know what it is to be hungry. Some might miss the odd meal but no one is sitting at the roadside picking up bits of corn which are lying in the dust and which have fallen off the cobs which someone else was selling earlier in the day. That is poverty. The people in Malawi are grateful to God for every morsel of food that they find.

The Church in Lilongwe is growing because God is at the centre of the

lives of the people and present in everything that they do. Prayer is a huge part of their lives at Church and in the home. Before each service there is a meeting of elders and deacons and those who lead worship. It is chaired by whoever is conducting worship along with the Session Clerk.

After someone has been asked to open in prayer, without any warning, they then choose the hymns for the service. Someone else is then nominated to read the lesson and others are asked to do the prayers of intercession, the prayer after the offering, the prayer after the sermon and the opening prayer.

When I was preaching I was asked to do the opening prayer. There is no time for preparation. You go into worship and you take part and it's not just a handful of people who take part. All elders would be expected to share in worship, not all in the one week, but all would be expected to share the responsibility for leading the people in prayer.

The elders also preach the message in the vestries, in the worshipping communities, on a Sunday afternoon. The vestries meet in people's homes or more often than not, their gardens which are dry and dusty and they all sit on mats and listen intently to the message which is shared. To help you understand how many there are, if there were vestries here, there would be one at High Bank Park, one in Lorne Street, one up Kilmory, one up in Fernoch and so on. Those vestries are the Church in those communities in Lilongwe and beyond and they are a living presence in those communities.

Prayer is central to the lives of the people in those communities but so is Scripture. We took out three hundred pairs of glasses and people wanted them so that they could read their Bibles, if they had one.

There is a hunger for the word of Scripture. Most of the people in the congregation don't have Bibles so they hang on every word that is read and preached. They soak in Scripture and they teach their children in Sunday school, bible verses and bible stories which they recite in Church, Sunday by Sunday as well and singing and dancing.

When the children sing, even in school, they sing about Jesus and that is why their Church is growing.

This is Pentecost, the Sunday we remember how God sent the Holy Spirit to live in us and among us as a Comforter, as our Strength and as our Guide. The Spirit came to teach us, to rebuke us, to encourage us and to be our constant companion.

In Britain, the Spirit is almost left for the Pentecostal Churches. When

we start speaking about the Spirit of God moving among us, convicting us of sin and leading us towards new life, we all get a bit jittery. The people in Kasamba still preach the gospel. They have not watered it down to such an extent that it is hardly even recognisable.

The Holy Spirit was never an optional extra in the early Church. The Holy Spirit was what empowered the disciples to get out of their locked room and share the Good News of the risen Christ. The Holy Spirit is what enabled them to spread the Word of God and to see three thousand converted in one day. The Holy Spirit is the power behind and within the Church in Lilongwe and it is growing, not in a shallow way but in a deep and meaningful way.

I want what they have for us here in Lochgilphead. I want us to know the power of the Spirit. I want us to hunger after God's word and not to leave it locked in a closed book. I want us to digest it and to be nurtured by it so that we grow in faith and in strength and in numbers.

Am I being critical of you today? The answer is no. We are all in this together and I am part of this congregation. I felt dead on the inside when I left here and I can't imagine that I was the only one. But I no longer feel dead and I want to hang on to that life which I found in Kasamba and I want somehow to share it with you, if you too feel dead on the inside.

We have a faith in this congregation. You are a people of faith but we live in a land of darkness, a land where God is ignored despite all that we have and I want to change that, not on my own, but with your help and with the help of the Holy Spirit. I want for us what Kasamba has.

Are they perfect? No, they're not. They are people but they are positive and they are supportive and they are up against it in ways that we cannot begin to imagine, not just in Lilongwe but in the prayer houses on Lake Malawi where the people face five months of starvation from September/ October onwards and yet even there, they tell us that God is good.

How humbling is that? It was a certainly a wake up call to those of us from the west. Those people are our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are part of our Church, part of our congregation and they value us in ways that are truly humbling.

They were such an encouragement to each of us who visited from Argyll but they received encouragement from us too. However, we need to be strong for them when they face hard times. We need to be there to hold

them before God in the same way as they will hold us before God.

But to support them, we need to be strong in our faith. We need to be grafted into Christ as part of His body. That is what we talk about in baptism, being grafted into Christ, being part of Christ but we need the power of the Spirit of God living within us and we need to draw on that power as the disciples did when first they stepped out and preached the gospel to the crowds who would listen.

Through Christ we have been given the right to become children of God. John writes in chapter 1 of the gospel: **to all who did receive Christ, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God.** But with rights come responsibilities and our responsibility is to go into all the world, baptising and teaching the people to observe all that Jesus has commanded us.

Are we ready as we celebrate the Church's birthday and the coming of the Holy Spirit to accept that commission, that calling of Jesus to build His Church and to His people?