

Quinquennial Visitation

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Preacher: Jack Drummond

[0 : 00] As your minister, Willie, has already indicated this morning, every five years all Church of Scotland congregations receive a visit from a small committee of the local presbytery.

Glasgow Presbytery has recently allocated to every congregation what is called a PSD team. PSD standing for Presbytery Support and Development Team.

And that team is made up of three members of Presbytery, one from the Superintendents Committee, myself, one from the Mission Strategy Committee, Willie Bell, and one from the Ministry and Stewardship Committee, George Wilson.

And the representative from the Superintendents Committee is asked to lead the team and arrange the visit. There are three parts to the visit.

The first is a meeting with the minister, which we had on Monday afternoon. And this is followed by a meeting with the church leaders, in your case, the management team, and then Kirk Session, and representatives from the Congregational Board.

[1 : 25] And before these meetings take place, the visiting team has received factual information about church organizations, congregational life, and figures dealing with finance and church membership.

And then the third part of the visit is what is happening today. Because the most important event in the weekly program of every congregation is the public worship of Almighty God.

The members of the congregation gather every Sunday and here on several occasions during the week. Not first and foremost for fellowship or a chat over coffee or to count the offering, although these things all follow on.

The members of the congregation gather to unite their hearts and voices in the worship of Almighty God. The Presbytery visiting team, along with, I'm sure, many other visitors to a church like St. George's Tron, the visiting team come to share in the congregation's worship, to enjoy the experience of worshipping with the congregation whose ministers and elders we've already met in a more formal setting.

The ministerial member of the team, as I'm doing now, normally leads the worship. So here this morning, we encourage you to share God's Word in a way which I hope is relevant to the congregation's present needs and to this central part of Glasgow where you are sent.

[3 : 21] We also have to write a report which is considered by the Presbytery Superintendent's Committee. And I have to say to you that from the moment the members of the team stepped through the doors of the church last Monday afternoon, it was obvious to us that there is a remarkable ministry taking place here.

And we want to congratulate you on this. For the imaginative way in which you've developed this church and opened up these premises so that shoppers and workers and others can find fellowship and support and faith in the centre of the city of Glasgow.

And we realise that all of this has been achieved through many of you giving sacrificially so that Christ's kingdom can be advanced.

It's maybe not the right thing to say well done in a sermon, but I do say well done to you all for what has been achieved since the last quinquennial visitation.

Now to turn to God's Word. More and more these days people are choosing to live on their own.

[4 : 51] And in these affluent times, sons and daughters are moving out of their parents' home before they are married. And there are many other people who would not choose to live on their own.

Sad circumstances may have brought this about. And we instinctively extend our sympathy and friendship. One of the first comments that God makes in the Bible in the story of the Garden of Eden

is this.

It is not good for man to live alone. God knew that to enable us to live and enjoy life to the full, we need the love and friendship and support of other people.

It's part of human nature to seek the satisfaction of our deep need of fellowship. Well, to find this fellowship, people today can go out to various places, to pubs, to social clubs, to sports clubs, to many other associations corresponding to their particular interests.

However, the organization which is best equipped to meet people's needs is surely the Christian church.

[6:16] We read earlier what St. Paul said about the church and the unity of the church in his letter to the Ephesians. And I wonder do we recognize ourselves in these statements about members of the church in Ephesus in our first Bible reading.

Ephesians chapter 4, verse 2, where Paul reminds us that we have been called with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, and to remember that there is one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.

Is that a description of our life as members of this congregation? I want to consider three things about the church which I hope might be helpful and relevant today.

First, something basic. To consider what the church is. When we speak about the church, we often have in mind just our local congregation and its familiar activities.

But we have to remember that this congregation, any congregation, is only a single unit in a Christian denomination, the Church of Scotland, of over half a million people all over the land.

[8:13] And we have to remember, too, that the Church of Scotland is only one among a number of similar denominations which exist in Scotland and all over the world.

I've already referred to Paul's picture of the church. Jesus' picture of the church is of a large vine with its branches spread out in different directions from the stem of the vine.

God is portrayed in our reading from John's Gospel as the vine dresser or the gardener. Jesus as the stem of the vine and the branches draw their life from the same root.

So the different churches, the different denominations, perhaps is a better word, all belong to and form part of a single great universal church.

In all its branches, the church has two distinguishing marks as we have already sung together this morning. The church is the creation of the Lord Jesus Christ and He is its only King and Head.

[9:37] The church didn't owe its foundation to the independent energy of men and women. If, for example, there's an area, let's say, of new houses where a number of people might enjoy bowls, someone might well say, let's see if we can buy a piece of land and begin a bowling club.

The church is not founded like that. It came into being in response to Jesus' life of love. And the life of the church is a divine and not a man-made institution.

Through its long history of 2,000 years and in spite of its many failures and defects, the church has been sustained by the life-giving spirit which comes from our Lord Himself.

And we have to remember also that the church is a fellowship of faith and love. A fellowship of those people who believe Jesus to be their Saviour and Lord.

We're all different. But there is the one thing that we have in common. Our faith that Jesus is our Lord and Saviour.

[11:00] And as soon as we acknowledge this, it should follow on almost automatically that we show the same love which was the essence of Jesus' short life of 33 years here on earth.

Love should be the distinguishing mark of the church and of every congregation. St. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Galatians.

Just a verse from Galatians chapter 5, verse 6. In Christ Jesus, the only thing that counts is faith working through love.

Faith working through love. The church is the organization which regulates its own life by the love of Jesus and strives to make Jesus' love effective in the life of an unloving and uncaring world by every means within its power.

And because Christianity is a practical religion, we must secondly consider not only what the church is, but what the church is called to do.

[12:19] St. Paul's favorite description of the church is particularly helpful here. Paul calls the church in several of his letters the body of Christ.

That is to say, just as a person's body is the visible means by which he makes his mark on the area of the world where he lives, so the church is the visible means by which the plan and purposes of Jesus are released in the world.

Whatever Jesus sought to do during his short life, the church should be seeking to do exactly the same in the power of his Spirit.

The church is called to prolong and extend the loving service which Jesus gave to be as it were Jesus' hands and feet and voice for the working out of his will.

Just as Jesus showed in Palestine the love of God, so the company of believers, the church and the power of God's Spirit must show that same love in ever wider circles until Jesus' words and the Lord's prayer are fulfilled.

[13 : 45] Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The first time the church reached out to share the gospel with those outside the Jewish faith was when Peter visited the home of the Roman centurion, the Roman captain Cornelius.

Acts chapter 11 verse 38 Peter told Cornelius that Jesus went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil.

You see, in Jesus' life and ministry we see one single aim to free people from evil in all its forms and to bring them body, mind and soul into the kingdom of God.

The church is called to continue and extend this active ministry of loving service. So a congregation of the church when it is faithful to its mission is of course a centre of preaching and worship but more than this it will also be a fellowship of service concerned to bring about the kingdom of God in the life of the community where it is set.

and you are indeed practising this great biblical principle here in the centre of the city of Glasgow where so many shoppers and workers pass your doors.

[15 : 25] Lastly, we have to acknowledge we can do none other than acknowledge these days the sickness of the church because the church has clearly failed to be what God called it to be.

Our sins become the sins of the church and the real miracle is that the church imperfect as it is bound to be because it is composed of imperfect human beings the real miracle is that the church is still here today and still growing in numbers worldwide.

The church may be shrinking in Scotland and other countries of Europe but we can look beyond that to the worldwide church and see how the church is still continuing to grow.

And time after time in the history of the church revival has come to what might have appeared to be a dying institution.

The church has time and again recovered from what looked like fatal illness so we must never despair of the power of God to fulfill his purposes here in Scotland because of the sickness of the church of Scotland we are facing some extremely difficult decisions.

[17 : 10] About a hundred years ago before the union in 1929 of the church of Scotland and what was then the United Free Church the church of Scotland drew up eight declaratory articles as a basis for the constitution of the church of Scotland in spiritual matters and these eight declaratory articles were enshrined in the church of Scotland act of 1921 the third of these articles is the one which is causing the Kirk particular problems today because the third article commits the church of Scotland to providing a ministry of word and sacrament to every part of Scotland without exception you the good folk of St

George's Tron continue to be the body of Christ here but as some of you probably know I could take you a few miles to other parts of the city of Glasgow where there will just be a handful of people worshipping on a Sunday the most important meeting in the life of the church with if you like to put it this way continuing this metaphor of sickness with painkillers being administered through the week perhaps by community groups to keep a sick body alive and the healthy congregations who may be considered wealthy only because people give sacrificially the healthy congregations are being asked to give more and more financially to the wider work of the church of Scotland and the church has to grapple with this challenge we can't ignore it is this

God's way of curing the ills of a sick church because you are both part of the church of Scotland and part of the body of Christ this issue must be addressed so let me take you back to Jesus picture of the vine if you take away a branch from a vine that branch will wither and die but for a short time the branch might still appear to be healthy but then gradually it withers and of course the only true truly healthy branches are those that remain attached to the vine and are regularly pruned these branches remain fruitful so we have here in our reading from

John's gospel a picture of fruitfulness to encourage you and me to abide in Christ so that our lives continue to produce the fruit of the spirit amen let us pray eternal God our father we want to thank you today for the privilege of being members of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ Christ we want to thank you for the opportunities given to us to use our time and gifts and money in the service of the church to advance Christ's kingdom we also want to pray for the church in its time of sickness peace particularly for the church of

Scotland as important decisions are being discussed and have to be faced even in the next year may your Holy Spirit overrule where the church is moving forward in error so that your will may be done so may this church of which we are apart recover from sickness and continue to be a force for good a force for Christ in our land hear this our prayer in Jesus name Amen