

Last week we looked at the theme of joy which runs through the Bible. At how both Pope Francis, in his book *the Joy of the Gospel*, and Paul, in his letter to the church at Philippi, speak to us of an experience of the Christian faith is filled with a deep and lasting joy. Not a surface joy, which we might call happiness, but a real God-given joy which has its roots in the faith, the trust, that God loves us now unconditionally and will never stop loving us whatever happens.

This morning's gospel from the end of Matthew is often seen as the great missionary commission for the church. *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations. . . remember I with you always.* One of the difficulties with our understanding of this passage is some folk think it implies that Jesus sends the disciples out and then stays behind. The word translated as *go* actually means *to travel*. So a better understanding of our great missionary call would be to say *Travel forth and remember I am with you always.* We are sent forth into to the world as missionaries, certainly, but not alone, Jesus travels with us always.

There is also a great deal of misunderstanding about the word mission and missionary. We tend to think that it is about someone else, a brave, special, chosen few who go forth to other lands to *make new Christians*. Or it perhaps more scarily about standing on the streets of Inverness with a placard and some leaflets handing them to passersby and exporting them to repent and return to church. All very John the Baptist! Pope Francis has a much broader, gentler and yet just as challenging understanding of mission. In *Joy of the Gospel* he talks about *pastoral mission*. This is mission which seeks to help everyone to grow spiritually so that they can respond to God's love ever more fully in their lives. He says clearly that we cannot merely wait in our church buildings but we need to move from mere conservation to a decidedly missionary kind of pastoral care. This pastoral mission will be source of great joy for church.

The church Pope Francis envisions is one which is community of missionary disciples who show God's love in the world. A task which requires us to get involved in people's lives, to support them, to stand with them patiently however long it takes. *Pastoral mission* is not about *bums on seats*. It is not results driven as we so often see missionary activity being.

Results mission is impatient mission which measures results in quantity not in quality. In *pastoral mission* the church, our church, is sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach. So it is not about everyone in Gorthleck, Croachy, Farr, Inveranie coming here to this church every Sunday. Some folk may come for a time when their need is great and then travel on their way. This is OK and we need to accept this as how mission most often works. Maybe it is easier for me as a former chaplain to see that this is how a *pastoral mission* actually works. We meet people where they are, stand by them, support them, help them to grow spiritually and then allow them to move on with God's blessing. *Pastoral mission* is about us as disciples holding the centre for each other and for those we meet outside of church. It is very much about working at the margins, the edges of society where people are often driven by circumstance to look closely at their spiritual needs which they don't give a second thought to when times are good.

The most challenging thing for us at the centre of this *pastoral mission* is that we too need to be open to conversion ourselves. To look at our structures, our customs, our often complacent attitude that says: *We have always done it this way*. Pope Francis says that even good structures are only helpful, to mission, when there is life constantly driving, sustaining and assessing them.

As I was writing this I realised that what we lack are good, clear images of what *pastoral mission* might look like. We know it isn't standing on street corners handing out mission leaflets but what is it? How do we know we are doing it if we cannot see a picture in our minds. Well let me give you an example, there is a movement both inside and outside the Christian churches called random acts of kindness. It is about simply doing something kind for someone without being asked, and often without even being recognised and thanked. So two stories from the internet which happened in the UK this week:

- one about a mother in a Scottish city who had to leave her car parked overnight on a street near a hospital after her son was kept in as a patient. She came back to not one but two parking tickets on her windscreen under which as a note with £25 saying Pay the fine and don't worry.

- the second about a young man who regularly bought a homeless guy about his own age a cup of coffee every morning on his way to work. They got talking about football and found they supported rival teams. The young man in work went on to treat his homeless cup of coffee buddy to a football match, being played by the team he did not support. If I tell you the two teams were Everton and Liverpool you can see this was a big deal!

For me this is what *pastoral mission* might look and feel like. About being open to someone else's needs, about listening to others and responding appropriately. I like the feel of random acts of kindness perhaps we need to ponder what ***random acts of mission might look like?***