

## Reflection for Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020

Readings: Philippians 3:5-14 and Matthew 7: 15 – 20

*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.*

*Philippians 1:9 - 11*

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Today, the first Sunday of October, is the day on which, annually, we celebrate the harvest of God's creation. For obvious reasons it is a much-curtailed celebration this year but no less sincere for that. Perhaps, indeed, the ongoing situation helps to focus our minds more fully on the reliability and faithfulness of God's creation in providing for us.

The passage I have just quoted is part of Paul's prayer for his Christian friends in Philippi – which, at the time, was an important city. The prayer comes in the first Chapter of his letter to the Philippians and our main reading, as we heard, is taken from Chapter 3. In the prayer Paul expresses the hope that the Philippians will succeed in producing the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ. This is the goal which Paul believes Christ Jesus has set for all who will follow him and the hope of God for all humankind.

All around us here in beautiful East Lothian the fields have yielded their harvest of grain and of vegetables. In the case of the vegetables it will go one for some time yet. The fruit trees of Gullane and Aberlady have produced a bumper harvest and the work of preserving to sustain us through the winter is in full swing. It is natural and it is right that alongside our celebration and our thanksgiving for this harvest of the earth, we should also pause to consider the harvest of our own lives as those who try to follow Jesus.

This being the first Sunday of October I am suddenly confronted with the reality that after today, I only have three Sundays left as Minister of Aberlady and Gullane. Despite the fact that I announced the decision back in February I still find myself taken aback that the end of this chapter is so close. Last week I noted that 27<sup>th</sup> September was the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination as a Minister of Word and Sacrament and I cast my thoughts back to the time of my call and my training. I am still reflecting back over the past; but this week it has been on the five and a half years I have spent with the congregations of Aberlady and Gullane. There is a very great deal for which I give thanks as I do so. The personal harvest which I have enjoyed here has been a rich blessing and that blessing is squarely founded in people. It has been a joy to get to know so many folk here and a huge privilege to be taken

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into your life and work as congregations and communities. You will always be a part of who I am, and I will carry that truth into my future with deep appreciation.

In Chapter Three of his letter to the Philippians, Paul expresses the truth that his past will always be a part of him. “*--- circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.*”

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It is entirely natural that there is a clear sense of pride in Paul that he has these --- by some measures --- impeccable Jewish credentials. According to the measure of the contemporary Judaism and its understanding of God – Paul is clearly a righteous man in the eyes of the law. Yet Paul’s sole purpose in writing thus – is to dismiss his “credentials” --- to set his past not on a pedestal ---- but to emphasise that it has no value. And it has no value – says Paul --- because of Jesus Christ. In Jesus God has taken human understanding and experience beyond the law --- and has – through grace --- opened up a whole new world. The righteousness of God --- that righteousness to which God calls all humankind - -- is not obedient conformity to a set of rules. The righteousness of God --- that righteousness to which God calls all humankind, is rather in following Christ – who – as we heard in Chapter Two and read last week ---- *though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.*

The devout and zealous Pharisee who was Saul has been stopped in his tracks by the risen Lord Jesus, --- and now the Apostle Paul ---- he has only one driving desire, which he describes in this way: *“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.”*

Paul goes on to say, *“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.”*

As I embark upon a new chapter in my life after 30 years as a parish minister, I can think of no better words to take with me than those. I spoke last week of my own sense of being stopped in my tracks by God. For me it was a rather slower process but then I am slow on the uptake. But God got through in the end. Christ Jesus has made me his own --- he lived and died and rose again for me ---- and as his

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own he has --- with extraordinary patience and grace --- used me in the Ministry of Word and Sacrament. By the same grace – there has been a harvest ---and for that I am hugely grateful --- and – yes --- proud to have been a part of it.

But however blessed and fruitful that past has been under God --- the story is not ended, and the goal is not achieved. There is still so much I need to learn if I am ever to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. There is still so much of the harvest to be ingathered and one of the things that excites me about the next chapter is the possibility of discovering more and serving in different ways the work of God's kingdom.

That which is true of me, under God's grace, is also true of you. These congregations of Aberlady and Gullane have served faithfully and fruitfully over many, many years. Nothing will ever change that. That past is hugely important --- foundational and inspirational. Yet, in the end, the work is not complete. It could not be any other way. As I prepare to move on, I know, for sure, that it is time for something different in my witness and service. There is no shame in that --- none at all. It seems almost certain that the future for these congregations will be very different to what has been over recent decades. It seems that God is saying that it is time for something different in the kingdom work in this place. There is an inevitable sadness in that, as there is for me in leaving you for new pastures. But there is also all of the exciting potential which is within the grace of God; a potential of which, as yet, you have not dreamed. Whatever the future holds, be sure that God will be with you in it. And whatever the future holds --- however the plant that is the Church is pruned and grafted, never forget that it will remain the Church so long as, under God's grace, it bears fruit for the kingdom of God.

A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Thus, you will know them ---- by their fruits. I have not the slightest doubt that you will go on to continue to bear good fruit for God's kingdom --- and as you do so this will always be my prayer for you

***“that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.”***

***Philippians 1:9 - 11***

**In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen**