

Presbytery Chairperson's letter of encouragement

Hello friends,

As I sit down to write to you today, I am conscious of the weight, for some of us, of being the church. For some of us, it feels hard going. You have told me so. It has led me to think about what it is that we are doing. Sometimes I think we have swapped following Jesus for being members of a church. This may be a bit harsh, but true enough that we should give it some attention. The truth is we are both of these things, and there is a balance between them and from time to time we need to check that balance. Are we more primarily followers of Jesus who come together as a community called the church, or are we more that great big thing called the church?

I have been prompted in this line of thought by the difficulty we are all having at the moment in maintaining the institution – in being the church. I have listened to folk who struggle without ministers. I see the load placed on a few to maintain congregations. I see at first hand, many of those same few people fronting up to be the Presbytery and I see, and am often part of, the reluctance to change the way we have always done things. Then I think about how this adventure called Christianity all started - with just a few people with a burning desire not to let die the thing that had started with Jesus. Then, I ask myself, what are we doing?

The truth is we have not always had a church organised in the way that most of us have known. Not too long ago someone gave me a bible with all the books marked with little tags for easy access. It occurred to me that the better part of the New Testament is made up of letters, or remnants of letters, parts of correspondence between a few, deep in faith, and small scattered groups of people, whose lives were made liveable by following the Way of Jesus together. Sounds a bit like us really.

The thing that struck me was that these letters, these bits of letters were all they had. Most were there before the gospels were collated. They were treasured and passed from hand to hand and from community to community. These little scraps of writing sustained them and they, each other. This realisation set me to thinking what are we about? What is more important? Is it more important for us to have polished services, delivered by specially trained people, or is it more important that we take what we have, let it form us as people and live it in a world where Jesus' message about the loving kindness of God, of God's tenderness for those abused or discarded, or used up, or spat out, is not welcome, but still a saving grace.

Then I ask myself, how is that life better formed. Does it happen when people come together to hear and carefully crafted message, or when the learned argue over points of doctrine, which most of us hardly understand, or does it happen when a few people come together, like the first amongst us long ago, pouring over little scraps of advice and encouragement (and sometimes correction), praying together and singing God's praise. Does it happen best when we share food and other things we have, when we live simply in a world set on consumption, when we speak truthfully in a world built increasingly on lies, when we lay down our lives to protect the innocence of children and make a space in our hearts for those abused and discarded, lost and lonely. I know which I choose, what about you? The fact is, whether we like it or not, we are being reshaped. We are all learning to do things differently.

What if instead of worrying about things we no longer have, we rejoice in what we do have. I am no Paul, but I write this letter to you every month. What if, instead of worrying about having a preacher you sat down and explored this letter together? Or, better still, read and ponder Paul's letters. What if on another week you simply read the scripture and prayed and sang together? What if you spent time getting to know and to care deeply for one another? Heaven help me, but what if you went down to the local café and sat down and looked around at the people eating by themselves? What if you struck up a conversation and invited them to eat with you, to grow in friendship? Little things. We are blessed. We have what we need to be who we are. I write as your friend in Christ,

Gereldine