

Readings: Isaiah 42: 1-9 / Matthew 3: 13-17

Text: *Jesus said, Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness* (Matthew 3: 15)

IN THE NAME OF GOD, FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

As you know, with its great vision of a church and school in every parish, the Scottish Reformation was always local in its outlook.

It remains so to this day and one of the great privileges of being Moderator is to see that the health and vitality of the church is to be found not in its Moderator or even its Moderator elect, the General Assembly, Presbyteries and all the associated courts and councils of the Church, but in the life and worship and activities of local congregations.

So it is a delight for Margaret and me to join you at Morningside today, and as Moderator to bring you the greetings, prayers and good wishes of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

With the schools back, offices and businesses returning to work, the Princes Street Christmas market over and the Christmas decorations packed away for another year, the rhythm and routine of home and family, working and church life has returned to normal.

While I hope you and yours enjoyed a good festive season, I am always struck by the number of people who tell me they are glad it is all over and they can get back to normal.

As Derek will quickly discover come May, there is no such thing as 'normal' in the life of the Moderator, every day and every week is different.

More importantly, however, following events in Bethlehem and the birth of Jesus the clear message of the Bible is there is no getting back to normal.

Why?

In a way that was not true before the birth of Mary's child, God has come among us.

And because God took face and voice in Bethlehem the world is different as a result.

One of the great controversies which rocked the early church concerned a reluctance to accept the full historical implications of the child in the manger.

Could Jesus really be the Son of God as well as the son of Mary?

Known as docetism (from the Greek word *dokein* which means to appear) the view emerged that Jesus only appeared to be a living, breathing human being.

The claim arose from a strand of Greek philosophy which viewed the material world as rotten and corrupt, the source of all evil and wrong.

And because the material world was rotten, it was self-evident Jesus could not be part of that world, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, because if he was part of that world it would mean Jesus was subject to the same corruption as the rest of humanity.

In order to resolve this dilemma the Docetic Jesus became so spiritualized, a divine being walking the earth but masquerading as a human being, that although his humanity was not denied, it proved impossible to take Jesus' flesh seriously.

Whatever else the Bible wants us to take seriously, it wants us to take Jesus' flesh seriously.

In the glorious prologue to his gospel, St John speaks about the Word that was in the beginning with God, and through whom all things were made, that Word became flesh and came to live among us.

And in the introduction to his gospel, Matthew's genealogy roots Jesus in the history of ancient Israel, fourteen generations from Abraham to David, fourteen generations from David to the exile, and fourteen generations from the exile to Mary and Joseph.

In other words, Matthew's Jesus is no celestial being beamed down to earth from outer space.

Rather he is someone with a history, someone who belongs, someone as fully human as the people he lives amongst and the people he has come to help, heal and save.

Bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, God took face and voice and came to live among us.

And to the extent to which all of these insights are present in the Biblical account of Jesus' birth, they now find confirmation in the story of his baptism.

With the exception of a family visit to Jerusalem's Temple, the gospels' writers demonstrate little interest in Jesus' childhood, his education or his young adult life.

Instead their interest begins when, aged about 30 years, Jesus travelled some 70 miles from Galilee in the north to the Jordan valley east of Jerusalem to be baptised by John.

It is a number of years since I stood at the place identified as the baptismal site.

The area is surrounded by landmines and, with the river Jordan little more than a dirty brown stream, it could hardly be a less inspiring prospect.

However, the fact all four gospels begin their account of Jesus' ministry as the wandering preacher, teacher and healer with the story of his baptism indicates the significance they placed upon this moment.

And Matthew suggests John the Baptist tried to persuade Jesus otherwise.

The reluctance of John to baptise Jesus is one of the curious themes in Matthew's version of events.

John's desert ministry was already well established, something evident from the fact it had attracted attention from people throughout the region.

Matthew has already told us John's baptism was for those Jews who recognised they had broken God's covenant and needed to change their ways.

Perhaps this is what made John hesitate, his wondering if Jesus really had broken God's covenant and needed to change his ways?

It is a puzzle Matthew leaves unresolved.

Instead he lets Jesus speak for the first time.

John is to set aside his anxiety and carry out the baptism as requested because according to Jesus *it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*

Righteous is one of Matthew's favourite words.

Remember the Sermon on the Mount where Matthew's Jesus promises those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled and those who are persecuted because of righteousness will be blessed for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.¹

Matthew's Jesus promises the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of heaven² and in his memorable Day of Judgment parable, it is the righteous who inherit eternal life because in feeding someone hungry, or offering hospitality to a stranger, it was as though they had fed or cared for Christ himself.³

So beginning at his baptism Matthew's Jesus comes to fulfill all righteousness, that is, in all the opportunities and challenges of his ministry he will try to do what God requires.

And in coming among us, becoming one of us, breaking the boundaries between heaven and earth, sharing our flesh, being baptised, living, breathing, working, belonging, being part of a family and being part of a community, this is what Jesus asks of us too.

¹ Matthew 5: 6, 10

² Matthew 13: 43

³ Matthew 25: 31ff

In all the challenges and opportunities of our lives, the days of sunshine and the days of rain, the times when our faith is strong and God is near, and the times when we are wracked with doubt and feel abandoned by God, as best we can we are to try and discern God's presence and promise and seek to do what God requires.

And what does God require of us?

This much at least; to do justly, love mercy and walk humbly, that is, to realise that following the birth of Jesus there is no getting back to normal, certainly not to the normal ways and values of the world.

Consumption, celebrity, entertainment, fame, wealth, power, being in control; these are some of the things the world values.

Forgiveness, hospitality, generosity, reconciliation, loving our enemy, refusing to walk past on the other side of someone's need; these are some of the values and characteristics of the kingdom of God.

Or to put that in other words; it is through the life of Jesus that the world finds a different purpose, a different direction and its new normality.

Like John our task is not to see the big picture.

Like John it is enough for us to *let it be so for now* trusting in the mercy and love of the God who is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end.

Instead, in all the opportunities and challenges of the coming year, at home or at work, in good days and in bad, whether serving the church as Moderator of its General Assembly, or as a member of this congregation, our task is to try and do what God in Christ requires, to notice the people he noticed, to respond in the way he respondedand in the doing to know we too are fulfilling all righteousness.

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen