

Write the vision

Habakkuk 2:1-4; Luke 17:5-10

It's a question that is asked so often in just about every job interview across the globe – 'What's your vision for the future? What are your plans for the next six months or year if you get this job? What do you see as your priorities in the coming weeks for this organisation?' Is that something that you have been asked in the past, or have you asked that question if you were the interviewer?

It's a question that comes up in different guises in our work life, and in our home life, and in the Church's life. What is our vision for the future?

Many years ago I was asked to visit a tiny little Church in rural North East Fife. I met with the Session Clerk and asked him how he saw the Church in ten years time. "More wrinkled", was his response.

It's a tough question, but it's a vital one for all churches, and all Christians. There are so many temptations when it comes to how we respond to it. Some are cast into deepest despair, and can only see shrinking numbers and aging membership and closures. Others wonder through some never-never land and refuse to acknowledge some of the challenging realities, imagining that somehow, what they imagined to have been the good old days will somehow magically return if only we did this, or that.

The recent survey of Scottish households looked at a wide range of issues facing communities across our country. One of the areas, picked up by the press, was the fact that just under half of households surveyed said they were 'not religious'. The media, as so often, looking for a bad news story, could have reported that over half of the households surveyed said that they **were** 'religious'.

Of course, it's what is meant by 'religious' that's the challenge. I suspect it's got more to do with not attending church regularly, or being part of 'organised' religion. It's nothing new. In 1819 Thomas Chalmers noticed that people in the inner city areas of Edinburgh and Glasgow were

less likely to go to Church than those in his rural parish in Kilmany. During the First World War army chaplains came across thousands of young men in the trenches who had never been anywhere near a Church in their lives.

Richard Frazer, the excellent minister at Greyfriars in Edinburgh, and the new convener of the Church and Society Council said about that report:

“The activity of congregations throughout Scotland is not confined to church attendance on a Sunday morning, and statistics on religious affiliation tell just a small part of the story.

"It is recognised that people express an openness to faith and spirituality without feeling it necessary to tie that into to affiliation to a church or other recognised faith based organisation. Many of the initiatives of the Church of Scotland over recent years have sought to meet people where they are, rather than expecting everyone to come to the church. We recognise that whilst many people still value traditional church membership and going to church on a Sunday, others continue to have spiritual needs that are not necessarily expressed by declaring that they are “religious”. In many respects, the Church of Scotland is adapting successfully to this new landscape.

"We have almost 1400 congregations, and there are many where activities throughout the week are as much a part of church life as the activity of Sunday morning worship. In some cases there may even be more people affiliated to groups associated with the church than there are church members. These activities include everything from lunch clubs, baby and toddler groups, social enterprises and the organising of professional support such as counselling and social care, offered to everyone, regardless of belief.

"The social capital of Church of Scotland congregations that contribute to the wellbeing and flourishing of local communities is incalculable. In particular the Church of Scotland has a proud record of solidarity and support for some of the parts of our community where people experience poverty , inequality and injustice. Support for refugees, the homeless, the vulnerable, people living with dementia and other mental health issues and those experiencing

isolation and loneliness are just some of those whom the church and church members seek to walk alongside.”

Of course, in the reading from the Old Testament prophet Habakkuk, it's not walking, it's running. The people of Israel were going through an unspeakably tough time. Refugees in a land that had enslaved them, far from home and worship; communities fragmenting, people forgetting what they believed; individuals losing faith in a God Who appeared to have abandoned them. It's in this context that Habakkuk writes.

He paints this image of standing on a watchtower, and he is looking out, and watching and waiting. Eyes fixed on the far horizon, for he believes, he knows, he hopes, that God, outside organised religion, is still there. That God is still speaking.

And it comes. God's vision for the earth, God's plan to restore His creation to the goodness God intended, God's promise to bring blessing on all the families of the earth is still coming. “Write the vision, make it plain...” so that people running by might see it, and wonder, and think, and pause, and hope.

It's not an idle dream of the pious; it's not a lie on which they have set their hearts; it's not a vain hope which will bear no fruit or be destroyed by the cynicism and despair of the world. It's what people of faith believe, and experience still.

This is the promise that Habakkuk passes on to all the people who live, “in the meantime”, and who are sometimes wearied or discouraged, or down-hearted. God's people shall live by their faith, and that will give us strength to go on going on.

When I was in the United States in June I heard a senior churchman say, “The Church is not dying, it's reforming”. We are re-forming. It's part of the natural process of life. Nothing stays the same forever. Everything moves, shifts, adapts, and is fluid and flexible. That's the kind of Church I want to belong to. In fact, that's the kind of Church I do belong to.

For the last few weeks I've been standing up here looking at this scaffolding. We're hoping it will be coming down this week. It is, in fact, a parable for what the Church is. It's not simply about repairing something that's broken and decaying, it is renewing the fabric of this building so that we will be fit for purpose. It is reminding us that the Church is always under construction, and is never quite finished, because there's always something more to be done, to be imagined, and to be dreamed.

As we share the Lord's Supper today; as we look at the bread and the wine, we think of how we are still being re-formed. We think of the vision for renewal that communion gives us – that the broken is made whole; that all are welcome at the table of God's love; that hope comes out of despair, and life comes out of death. That people change, and the world does not remain the same. That the evil times pass, and that good times will come.

I look at Aleppo. That is my hope for that shattered city. I look at our half-believing nation. That is my hope for Scotland that it will experience welcome and inclusion and hope through God's love in ways that we can only begin to imagine, but some ways in which we can now, actively, gratefully, hopefully, share.

Write the vision. Tell the story. Share the good news. We're not done yet. We've barely even begun!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen