

Sunday 4th September 2011

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church

Morning Worship

Welcome/Notices

- ◆ holiday cover: Andrew Sarle; Sandra Mathers
 - ◆ reps for Presbytery Planning meeting, Thurs 29 Sept.
 - ◆ Team for inter-church quiz, Friday 23 September
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Introit:

(Hy. 619/620)

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me;

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me.

Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.

Spirit of the living God, move among us all;

Make us one in heart and mind, make us one in love.

Humble, caring, selfless, sharing,

Spirit of the living God, fill our lives with love!

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Call to Worship:

You are a chosen race, the King's priests, a holy nation, God's own people, chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God, who called you out of darkness into his own marvellous light. At one time you were not God's people, but now you are his people; at one time you did not know God's mercy, but now you have received his mercy.... As the scripture says, "You have found out for yourselves how kind the Lord is."

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So, with grateful hearts, let us worship God as we sing....

HYMN 130: Ye servants of God

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Talk to the Children

- ◆ children out to the front
- ◆ said this last week, but it is good to have you back - the church has been empty without you all
- ◆ a bit like our tree and hillside; we've been neglecting it a bit
- ◆ the blossom was on the branches for a lot longer than it should have been, and it will soon be time to turn the leaves around to show their autumn colours
- ◆ Jessica was here one Sunday and thought it would look better with some ANIMALS on the hillside.
- ◆ Can you think of anything else that could go on the wall?
- ◆ Challenge for all of us - something to think about
- ◆ As I was thinking about that, I imagined God looking around on his new-made world - round about Day 5 - when there was land and sea and sky; light and darkness; lots of plants growing on the earth, but nothing else - and thinking 'It's a bit empty'; what else can I put in it?
- ◆ So he got going and put lots of fish in the sea; and birds in the sky; wild animals in the jungle; sheep and cows and horses in the fields.
- ◆ and still he's thinking, 'No, it's a bit empty - there's something missing.'
- ◆ Listen to this poem about what happened next:

THE CREATION

James Weldon Johnson

Then God walked around,
And God looked around
On all that he had made.
He looked at the sun,
And he looked at his moon,
And he looked at his little stars;
He looked on his world
With all its living things,
And God said: I'm lonely still.

Then God sat down –
On the side of a hill where he could think;
By a deep, wide river he sat down;
With his head in his hands,
God thought and thought,
Till he thought, I'll make me a man!

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of his hand;
This great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till he shaped it in his own image;
Then into it he blew the breath of life,
And man became a living soul. Amen. Amen.

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LET US PRAY:

God our Maker, the more we find out about this amazing world we live in, the more we want to say 'thank you' for all the trees and plants and flowers; the birds and fish and animals - new kinds still being discovered every day. And ourselves, most amazing of all. Boys and girls, men and women, made to be like you, to keep you company and help you look after the world you had made. God, we have not made a very good job of that so far - partly because we have only been thinking about ourselves, and what we want. Help us to be more careful with your world; to be kinder to one another; and so make our world more like the kingdom Jesus was thinking about when he taught his friends to say this prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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HYMN 155: Think of a world without any flowers

O.T. Reading: Exodus 20: 1-17 The Ten Commandments p. 76
God spoke, and these were his words: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, where you were slaves. "Worship no god but me. "Do not make for yourselves images of anything in heaven or on earth or in the water under the earth. Do not bow down to any idol or worship it, because I am the Lord your God and I tolerate no rivals. I bring punishment on those who hate me and on their descendants down to the third and fourth generation. But I show my love to thousands of generations of those who love me and obey my laws. "Do not use my name for evil purposes, for I, the Lord your God, will punish anyone who misuses my name.

"Observe the Sabbath and keep it holy. You have six days in which to do your work, but the seventh day is a day of rest dedicated to me. On that day no one is to work - neither you, your children, your slaves, your animals, nor the foreigners who live in your country. In six days I, the Lord, made the earth, the sky, the seas, and everything in them, but on the seventh day I rested. That is why I, the Lord, blessed the Sabbath and made it holy. "Respect your father and your mother, so that you may live a long time in the land that I am giving you. "Do not commit murder. "Do not commit adultery. "Do not steal. "Do not accuse anyone falsely. "Do not desire another man's house; do not desire his wife, his slaves, his cattle, his donkeys, or anything else that he owns."

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LET US PRAY:

Creator God, from the start you had a vision of how your new-born world would be: animals, plants and people living in balance and harmony with each other; a world at peace with itself and you.

But as well you knew, it could not remain so for long. Perhaps it had to be that the fruit was eaten and innocence lost, so that we could be truly like you, our Maker - free to choose between right and wrong; forced to choose very often between greater and lesser evils and goods.

God of justice and order, we have heard the rules that you gave long ago to show us how to live well in your world. We confess that we have ignored your advice and broken your commandments to our own and the world's great harm.

We have not worshipped you above all other gods. We have let other people, other values, take the place that you alone should have in our lives: success, money, family, even church have become

our idols and your rivals, and we have felt the pain of our faithlessness without fully understanding why.

You taught us, through wise people long ago, to show respect for the natural rhythms of life, with a right balance between work and rest. You said that we should show respect for parents; for life; for marriage; for property; for truth. You said it would go well with us if we did, and badly if we did not. Our God, we acknowledge the wisdom of that warning, and confess our failure sometimes to heed it.

Nor have we always been content with what we have. We have looked longingly at the grass in the other field, instead of tending and being grateful for our own.

Gracious God, we give thanks for Jesus Christ, your Son, the only truly human being who ever lived, and for the new way he showed of living life that is abundant and free. No rules, except one which encompasses and transcends every other: the all-encompassing, life-transforming power of love.

God, you know that we have fallen short of that law too: every day and in so many ways. But we give thanks that the remedy is not punishment, but love itself. Fill us with your love, we pray, guaranteed by the Spirit of your Son, who is within us and all around us.

Assure us of your forgiveness, remind us of our calling to Christ's service, and give us the grace and courage we will need to go on loving and serving the world in his name. However long it takes, however much it may cost us, keep us faithful and hopeful and joyful to the end, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

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N.T. Reading: Matthew 18: 15-20 Church order & unity p. 27

"If your brother sins against you, go to him and show him his fault. But do it privately, just between yourselves. If he listens to you, you have won your brother back. But if he will not listen to you, take one or two other persons with you, so that "every accusation may be upheld by the testimony of two or more witnesses,' as the scripture says. And if he will not listen to them, then tell the whole thing to the church. Finally, if he will not listen to the church, treat him as though he were a pagan or a tax collector. "And so I tell all of you: what you prohibit on earth will be prohibited in heaven, and what you permit on earth will be permitted in heaven. "And I tell you more: whenever two of you on earth agree about anything you pray for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, I am there with them."

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N.T. Reading: Romans 13: 8-14 Duties towards one another p.201

Be under obligation to no one - the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law. The commandments, "Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not desire what belongs to someone else" - all these, and any others besides, are summed up in the one command, "Love your neighbour as you love yourself." If you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then, is to obey the whole Law. You must do this, because you know that the time has come for you to wake up from your sleep. For the moment when we will be saved is closer now than it was when we first believed. The night is nearly over, day is almost here. Let us stop doing the things that belong to the dark, and let us take up weapons for fighting in the light. Let us conduct ourselves properly, as people who live in the light of day - no orgies or drunkenness, no immorality or indecency, no fighting or jealousy. But take up the weapons of the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop paying attention to your sinful nature and satisfying its desires.

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HYMN 609: Come, living God, when least expected

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Sermon: *What kind of Church?*

On 17th March 1914, less than 5 months before the world was plunged into the most horrendous war it had ever known, that would see over 35 million people killed, and those who survived lose their innocence for ever - 5 short months before that devastating horror began, but when surely the storm-clouds were beginning to gather, a petition was presented to the Right Honourable The Lords of Council and Session, Commissioners for Plantation of Kirks and Valuation of Teinds, by one James Hotson Mather, Schoolmaster; Robert Leishman, Signalman; David Hain, Grocer; Thomas Crowe, Slater; Alexander Grierson, Jeweller; and James Baird, Road Engineman and various legal officials of the Church, asking that Laurieston Chapel of Ease, built in 1893, and enlarged in 1901 at a cost of £1950 should be granted full status and a parish of its own, with its minister, Alexander Barrie Robb, being granted a stipend of £160 sterling per annum, being £40 above the minimum required where there is no manse.

Among reasons given were the large size of the parish of Falkirk, with around 21,000 souls, 3000 of whom lived in Laurieston, and 600 of those (only a fifth) were members of the church.

"Laurieston Chapel, which is about a mile and a half distant from the Church of Falkirk, is seated to accommodate 533 worshippers. The congregation (including children of all ages) numbers about 600, and of these 405 are on the Communion Roll."

[Thanks to the Session Clerk, who found this document while cleaning out his cupboards - and apologies to R&W, for telling you so much about Laurieston. It would be interesting to see the case that was made when this church was granted full status, 45 years and two world wars later, in 1959]

The world has changed almost beyond recognition in the last 50 years, never mind the nearly 100 years since this petition was presented, the 450 years since the Scottish Reformation, or the almost 2000 since Jesus and his disciples started preaching, teaching and healing in the towns and villages of Galilee.

No wonder we need to keep reassessing and refashioning the church to meet the needs of every new generation. The problem is not that we keep doing that, but that we're usually 40 or 50 years behind where we need to be. And we don't start with a clean sheet. We have inherited buildings, rules and traditions for the past, and these are both a blessing and hindrance when it comes to building a church for today.

This is conference and meeting season in the church. Every post, every batch of emails brings word of some meeting that the organisers are convinced is vital for ministers and elders to attend. One slightly different one is a day conference being held in Edinburgh at the end of October. It has been organised by people within the Church of Scotland who are worried by the arguments and divisions that seem to be getting ever more heated and acrimonious within our own denomination, never mind the wider church. The group is called OneKirk, and the title of the conference is a question, "What kind of church?"

What kind of church are we?

What kind of church do we want to become?

What kind of church does God want us to be?

Those are questions that we will have to address locally over the winter months, as Falkirk Presbytery tries to draw up yet another presbytery plan.

In the past, when a minister moved to another church or retired, the congregation would ask for permission to call another minister. A decision would then be made about the future of that congregation: whether it would continue unaltered, or be linked or united with another church, then or at some time in the future. This was clearly unfair, and made people feel very vulnerable should their minister decide to leave. So for many years now, each presbytery has had a plan - usually revised every 5 years or so - for what the future shape of the area should be. In our own case, the plan for the Braes area of Falkirk presbytery, which currently has 7 congregations (Laurieston; Redding & Westquarter; Polmont Old; Brightons; Blackbraes & Shieldhill; Muiravonside; Slamannan) and 5 ministers, should come down eventually to 4½ ministers - but not until one or more of the present ministers leave or retire.

However, this has all changed, because the accountants in the Ministries Council in Edinburgh did their sums and realised that if we went on paying the number of ministers we have at the moment, the church would be bankrupt in a few years' time. So they proposed, and the General Assembly agreed, that new plans should be in place by the end of 2013, to show how the total number of full-time paid ministries in the Church of Scotland could be reduced to 1000. In the case of Falkirk Presbytery, we have to reduce from 38 to 32 posts, and in the Braes area we have to meet together to work out how we will use our new allocation of 4 full-time ministries. The first meeting is on 29th September, and we need 10 people to represent our congregation.

I can't say that I'm looking forward to this process, but my hope is that we won't just batten down the hatches, duck down in our trenches and defend our own little corner. So long as our church doesn't have to close, never mind what happens anywhere else; never mind how, most effectively, we can serve the people of our

parishes, who are increasingly unconcerned about who we are and what we have to offer.

That is part of the background against which we have to ask the question, "What kind of church do we have to be to represent Christ and share the good news of his love with those around us?" We can no longer expect that people will come to us. Even for weddings and funerals, which used to be the last stronghold of the church - the two reasons that people who were otherwise indifferent still needed us to be here - there has been a massive shift towards humanist, and vaguely spiritual but non-religious celebrations. And that is only going to increase, as people discover that other options are available.

However much we may regret these changes, if we do, we can't expect that people will come to us, so if we want to serve other people in Christ's name, we have to be where they are, and that may mean hard choices, including decisions to give up some of what is safe, and precious and familiar.

In Laurieston, the congregational board has just started on your behalf asking questions about our church buildings. We're going to commission an architect to draw up some plans of how our building could be adapted so that we can serve our community more effectively. In Redding and Westquarter, we are fortunate that the church building is well maintained, and we have a lovely new hall that lots of people want to use. But that has led to discussions about what sort of groups we want to be using the hall, and how much we should charge. That is all part of working out 'what kind of church" we want to be; what we are here for and how we can best achieve our aims.

So what kind of church are we?

Sadly, at a national level, and in the local area too, we are bitterly divided. Superficially, the conflict is over the issue of sexuality, but I am convinced there is more to it than that. I strongly suspect that if the division hadn't come to a head over this issue, it would have happened over something else.

We are continuing to decline in numbers, and consequently have less money coming in on a regular basis, and consequently a niggling, background anxiety about the future viability of the church that we love.

We're a Reformed, Presbyterian church in theory; but in practice we often behave much more like congregationalists. All our loyalty is to our local congregation; we fear and resent interference from presbytery and the dreaded 'Edinburgh', though we expect 'them' to be there to support us when we run into trouble.

We're tired, I think, very many of us, but also persistent, faithful, courageous, generous (I'm constantly surprised by just how generous ordinary church members can be) and at the same time we are confused and uncertain. And in our uncertainty we have a tendency to become legalistic and defensive.

What kind of church do we want to be?

And the one answer that simply won't do is the one that comes most readily to our hearts and our lips: 'If only the church could be like it used to be when....

..... my granny used to take me to the Sunday School, and we went to the church in the morning and the Brethren hall in the afternoon, and all my pals were there because there was nothing else to do on a Sunday;

..... everyone rallied round to help with the church fair, and the whole village came, and we made enough money to keep the church going through the year;

..... the minister and schoolmaster ran the village between them, and everyone looked up to them.

There's always a danger of putting on rose-coloured spectacles when we look back to the past. There never was a Golden Age, and even if there had been, the past is gone. We can't recapture or recreate it. We respect it, we're grateful for it, we may mourn its passing, we learn from it and we ask:

What kind of church does God want us to be... now... in Falkirk... in 2011? Open or closed? Certain or seeking? Traditional or adventurous? Homogenous or varied?

The first place to look for an answer, you might think, would be here - in the Bible - recognised throughout the Church of Scotland as the 'supreme rule of life and faith'. But doing so, unfortunately, opens up as many questions as it answers. Sadly, many of our bitterest arguments in the church today are over what the Bible says and how we should interpret and live by it.

Even the Ten Commandments, which are surely as straightforward a guide as anyone could ask for, a clear statement of the way God intends his people to live, can be read and understood in different ways. By far the most emphasis is put on the first four commandments, which have to do with worship of God, and in particular the two aspects that marked out the people of Israel as different from the neighbouring tribes: monotheism and sabbath observance.

Surrounded by people who worshipped many different gods, there was always the temptation for the Jews to hedge their bets, and while doing what Yahweh required, add in a little offering to the local fertility gods, just in case they did have some influence over the harvest after all. The first two commandments make clear that this is not an option, "You shall have no other gods apart from me.... you shall not worship idols..."

So far, so unambiguous, until we try to translate this into advice for the 21st century. Are liberal Christians being led astray by the 'gods' of the other nations when they look at the massive changes that have taken place in social attitudes in recent years, and suggest that Christian moral teaching needs to take this into account? Or are conservative Christians in danger of idolatry when they place the literal words of scripture on a pedestal above everything else?

Jesus had the highest respect for the Jewish Law, and in many cases he homed in on what is suggested by the 10th commandment: that it is not enough to avoid breaking the rules by our behaviour; our thoughts and attitudes matter too. Not only must we refrain from stealing our neighbour's possessions; we mustn't even wish they were our own. So Jesus says it's not enough that a person hasn't actually committed murder or adultery; wishing someone dead or looking lustfully at another person's wife or husband is just as bad.

But Jesus had no intention of introducing a new, more stringent set of rules and regulations for his followers. Paul is completely in tune with the spirit of Jesus when he says that the whole of the Law is summed up in the one over-riding imperative of love:

"... the only obligation you have is to love one another. Whoever does this has obeyed the Law. The commandments... are all summed up in the one command, 'Love your neighbour as you love

'yourself.' If you love others, you will never do them wrong; to love, then is to obey the whole Law."

Of course, this didn't always work out in practice. One of the recurring themes in the New Testament - in both gospels and epistles - is the need for unity in the church. Jesus' prayer for his disciples, recorded in John's gospel is 'that they might be one', just as he and the father are one. One of only two occasions where the word 'church' occurs in the gospels is in the passage we read from Matthew's gospel about how to deal quietly and respectfully with conflict. And Paul is constantly urging the fledgling Christian communities to put aside their differences and be of one heart and mind. The only reason why unity should be such an important theme in the literature that has come down to us from the early church is that there must have been significant divisions and differences of opinion even then, in the heady days of church founding and growth.

Many of Paul's letters deal with specific problems in the churches which he had founded, but there were also occasions when the power of the gospel could be seen at work; when the transforming power of love was evident in the lives of real people and real communities. One such example was the church in Ephesus, and I'd like to finish by reading Paul's prayer of thanksgiving for God's people there (Ephesians 1: 15-23):

"Ever since I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all of God's people, I have not stopped giving thanks to God for you. I remember you in my prayers and ask the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, to give you the Spirit, who will make you wise and reveal God to you, so that you will know him. I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light, so that you will know what is the hope to which he has called you, how rich are the

wonderful blessings he promises his people, and how very great is his power at work in us who believe. This power working in us is the same as the mighty strength which he used when he raised Christ from death and seated him at his right side in the heavenly world. Christ rules there above all heavenly rulers, authorities, powers, and lords; he has a title superior to all titles of authority in this world and in the next. God put all things under Christ's feet and gave him to the church as supreme Lord over all things. The church is Christ's body, the completion of him who himself completes all things everywhere."

What sort of church does God want us to be? One that recognises Christ as Lord, is open to the leading of his Spirit, and empowered by the life-transforming energy of love.

May his Spirit so lead, transform and use us, to the everlasting glory of his name.

AMEN

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HYMN 622: We sing a love that sets all people free

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Offering

Choir Voluntary:

For I'm building a people of power,
and I'm making a people of praise,
that will move through this land by my spirit
and will glorify my precious name.

Build your church, Lord;
make us strong, Lord;
join our hearts, Lord, through your Son.
Make us one, Lord, in your body,
in the Kingdom of your Son.

"You are the people of God; he loved you and chose you for his own. So then, you must clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Be tolerant with one another and forgive one another whenever any of you has a complaint against someone else. You must forgive one another just as the Lord has forgiven you. And to all these qualities add love, which binds all things together in perfect unity."

For I'm building a people of power,
and I'm making a people of praise,
that will move through this land by my spirit
and will glorify my precious name.

Build your church, Lord;
make us strong, Lord;
join our hearts, Lord, through your Son.
Make us one, Lord, in your body,
in the Kingdom of your Son.

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LET US PRAY:

God, you have called us to be your people, your witnesses in the world, not because we are better, or wiser, or holier than anyone else - far from it - but because for whatever reason we have been privileged to hear Christ's story and experience his grace. We have heard his call to service, and have no option but to respond in whatever way we can.

We give thanks for the resources you have given us to help us fulfil our high calling: words, written in scripture; and stories told to us by those who have been this way before. We give thanks for companions on our journey: people to walk alongside us, bearing our burden, enlivening our vision, believing for us when faith is hard, sharing our load and allowing us the privilege of caring for them.

We pray now for the church and for the wider world you have given us to serve. May we not be so caught up in our own affairs that we forget our calling is to witness and to service. We are chosen not for our own glory, but for the good of others.

So help us to put our own house in order - above all to put our differences aside - so that we can be the loving, welcoming community that you want us to be; a place of refuge for the weary; hope for the despairing; challenge for the energetic; light for the world's darkness and salt for its blandness.

We pray for those in positions of leadership, that they may know your guidance and your grace; for church members; and for those who might have been part of the community of faith had it not been for the divisions and lack of love that they have seen in us.

Mighty God, Christ's kingdom is stronger and subtler than any human institution. Its seeds are growing safely underground; its treasure is buried, always waiting to be discovered in the unlikeliest of places by those who want it badly enough to go on searching.

His kingdom - his new way of living and loving - cannot ultimately fail. We ask only that we may be part of it, helping and not hindering its purposes by what we say and do in his name.

We offer prayers for those in our community who are sick and need your touch of healing; for those who are lonely and need a friend; for any who are despairing and need hope; or dying and need your peace.

As Christ endured untold sorrow for the sins of the world, so we offer ourselves to you, Lord God: to be your servants, and to shoulder people's burdens on your behalf; to be your witnesses, taking your love to men and women, the love which meets all need and answers every question, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

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HYMN 739: The Church's one foundation

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Benediction:

Go now to be who, by God's grace you already are:
The church of Jesus Christ; God's own people,
chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God
who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.
And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
rest upon you and remain with you all,
this day and for evermore.

Sung Amen

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