

Sermon 7th June (Colossians 3:11-17) “Imagine”

In December 1999, the British public voted it the song of the millennium:
John Lennon’s Imagine.

It is a utopian song of a society without possessions, greed, war, in which all “live as one”. It is a cry for the renewal of civilisation.

And, Lennon could only imagine that renewal in a society without religion, heaven, hell, or God.

But, as our society has got further away from God and religion, has it got any closer to Lennon’s ideal?

He wrote the song in 1970, since when we’ve had nearly 40 years of amazing progress, yet where are we?

The U.K. today has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe.

It has the highest rate of youth crime in Europe;
the third highest divorce rate and a massive drink problem.

We work the longest hours in Europe – yet lost productivity to sickness has doubled in the last 7 years.

12 million of us are on anti-depressants.

We’ve got big problems as a nation, and people are looking for hope.

Tony Blair, speaking in 1995, expressed it this way:

“We enjoy a thousand material advantages over any previous generation, and yet we suffer a depth of insecurity and spiritual doubt they never knew”.

Spot on Tony – well, what did you do about it?

People are hungry for answers, they desperately want to “imagine” something better – hence the popularity of Lennon’s utopian song.

But we are cynical that anything can change.

Gordon Brown tries to renew his government.

The Tories tell us what we need is a new government.

The Lib Dems tell us what we need is a new electoral system.

But we’ve stopped believing that any political leaders have anything significant to offer us, whatever their party. Political idealism is at an all-time low.

And here we are, seriously concerned that some people will look to the BNP and other extremists for answers.

There are all sorts of paradoxes here.

This is an individualistic society marked out by my personal rights, my headphones, and my ability to retreat into my customised world – where I can be alone.

This is a society where family is collapsing, no one wants to know their neighbours, organised social gatherings from bowling clubs, to churches, and trade unions, guides are struggling for numbers and people won’t commit.

Yet, we are obsessed with knowing the ins and outs of celebrity lives, we all know Susan Boyle, our football or pop heroes, and the cast of the soap opera - these are the imaginary friends.

If ever there was a time, when the hope of the gospel message was relevant to our society, it is now.

People need to know that they are loved.
People need reassured that they are known:
that they are valued by a God for who they are, and not how hard they work.

People need to be helped to imagine that the world does not have to be this way.
Indeed that it was not made to be this way
And indeed that it will not remain this way.
Because the God of all Creation is imagining something else.

And I bring you back to that verse at the beginning of Colossians
“For in him, the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself *all things*, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace through the blood of his cross”

God is reconciling *all things* in creation.
Not some just some things,
But, all things:

lives and jobs, and homes and families, economies, nations, the environment, trade,
health, communities, minds, bodies and souls.

All the pain, the loneliness, the feelings of pointlessness and hopelessness – all of that
being put right by the Creator through his mission of salvation.

And in the midst of all of that, the Church makes sense,
because, the Church is the beginning of that reconciliation of all of human society.

Colossians 3:10 “we are being renewed in the image of the creator”

And what does that renewal looking like?

3:11 “In that renewal, there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and
uncircumcised, barbarian Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all”

That was the amazing thing about the early Church.
The barriers between people were ripped down.
Jews ate with Greeks – unheard of:
racial and religious barriers thrown aside.

Slaves sat down to break bread with their masters – and to call one another “brother”
and remind one another that both were forgiven because Jesus died for them.
It was social dynamite.

A persecuting Pharisee – linked arms with the people he’d victimised:
the rich people, put themselves, and their possessions, at the disposal of the poor.

And the world looked at the Church and they said:
“see how they love one another”.

They Christians weren’t just talking about heaven, and how to get there,
they were showing what it looked like, right here and now.
They weren’t just offering a hope that things could be different,
they were demonstrating how the Holy Spirit could do something amazingly different
right in the middle of the life of the pagan city.

Oh they got it wrong.
They fought – they quarrelled
but even in that, something amazing, something unique, was happening.

It wasn’t perfect, far from it.
But it pointed, pointed to that renewal that God was bringing to the world.

But what does this “Church project” look like today?

[Richard Stilgo’s “Mrs. Beemish” was shown here, clip available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc80G6Yzu04>]

Now, we’re not really like that. Are we?

But we do have a PR problem.

And there’s perhaps a little truth in it somewhere.

“And I’d joint the movement if there was one I could believe in. Yeah, I’d break bread and wine, if there was a church I could receive in.” - Achtung Baby (U2)

From Vicar of Dibley, to Postman Pat’s Rev Timms, to media reports of sexual abuse in Children’s homes, we are seen either as ineffectual in offering anything whatsoever to society or even worst as part of the problem.

Which was sadly John Lennon’s point: the world would be better without religion.

But actually, we are doing rather better than that might suggest.

Ask yourself this:

Who runs the drop-ins for young mothers in this area?

Who runs the kids clubs and the uniformed organisations, and the holiday clubs?

What are the most effective voluntary organisations?

Who is going round doors collecting for the developing world?

Who is spearheading fair trade?

Who is opening up buildings to the community?

Who are the biggest givers?

And the answer is, to a large extent, the Church.

You.

Christians.

And we’ve just started.

We are modelling something different.

And it is not just what we do in here, or in our organisations.

It isn’t even mainly about that.

It is the whole of life that we live in, and every aspect of it.

As we live as part of God’s renewal.

Where he’s reconciling all things to himself.

I was on study leave last week – on a training course in London – and I only returned on Friday, so I’ve really not had time to process all the stuff I heard yet. But I’d like to give you two thoughts that might warm your hearts.

The first is that I went determined that I would not come back with another new idea for a new initiative for Stonelaw. Relieved? The Kirk Session will be, I know. Because it is not all about running Church programmes.

But I was reminded of something else that’s really important.

There are 160 hours in a week.

If we deduct 50 sleep we have 110 left.

Now, of those 110, even the most committed elder will generally spend less than 10 hours a week in church.

That means that you spend at least 100 hours a week doing other things – things not in church.

Yet, we spend so much time in church thinking about the 10 and not the 100.

That's only fine for people like me who spend more hours in church.

But what we need to be doing is helping us work out how we live as part of God's renewal in the 100 hours a week.

How do we live as parents, employees, and children?

What difference does our faith make in all these places we go?

How are they renewed by this gospel that reconciles all things?

Because it is not that we are in the world in order to pull people into the Church.

But it is that the gospel and the renewed life, of which we speak, here moves out into the world, to renew the world.

The end game of God is not that everyone comes into the church 110 hours a week, but it is that the whole world experiences this renewal in Christ.

Economics, family, workplace, education, media, politics, trade, shopping, art, culture, neighbourhood and music – all to be renewed.

But that is not to say what we do in here, in Church, is unimportant.

For here, as the Church, we model, and we imagine.

We begin to allow the Holy Spirit to create, a glimpse of this renewal of all things.

And so, Church life and relationships are important.

Here we end the isolation.

Here we say we are our brother's keeper.

Here we practice love, and grace

and behave not like the servant who was forgiven the debt – and refused to forgive but allowing the Grace we have received to be shown to each other.

Church must be family, and not theatre.

It must dare to talk of brothers and sisters and mean what it says.

It must let managing directors and cleaners be the same, be friends who are shaping each other in Christ.

It is not easy.

Paul writes (3:12) "As God's chosen ones... holy and beloved ...clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience."

And that means "bear with one another"

and that means "forgive one another".

And do it again, and again and again, and not with an indifference that says "I don't care what you think", but actively forgiving.

Because you want to make the Church work, if you want to be a useful part of it, you will need to do a lot of forgiving.

And Love – binds – and that's key

not just tolerance, not just niceness or friendliness, but love – love that costs and involves itself and that's more difficult.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

And be thankful. And indeed, thankfulness is the antidote to all the cynicism, criticism, and negativity that can so easily beset the Church. Rather rejoice in what God has made us. And be thankful.

“And Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” – richly and deeply
deep down
as we teach
as we admonish
and as we sing

Letting this Christianity be real, and shape a real community.

That we might imagine a different way in this world – that we might become a little imperfect glimpse of what God’s reconciliation of all things might look like.

And so, as we celebrate the Lord’s supper together this morning

As we break bread and share wine

As we say this is who we are together in him.

We imagine a small particle of that great feast of heaven breaking into our world in renewal today.

“And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, giving thanks to God the father through him.”

To him be all the glory,

Amen