

This week we have encouragement that the Covid restrictions should be gradually removed, as long as we don't see another surge of cases. Small steps but very welcome. Also a bit scary to think about meeting up with people again, public events and household gatherings. Small steps and careful progress. We think of gathering together for worship. When will that be? Not yet, we need to work within the guidance and regulations of the Church – not to be bureaucratically bound up, but to safeguard all our congregation and to work within the limitations of our congregation and our buildings. That time will come.

As we progress through Lent to the celebration of Easter, let's hold on to the wonder of that season, worship as we can, and rejoice in the life we have through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### **Lent week 5**

This week we come to the final section of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Have a read through Matthew Chapter 7 verses 13 to 28. A conclusion, a climax to all he has said before. Have you read the passage, read it again to pick up all the detail.

He presents a series of pairs – choices:

**Two routes** – one broad and busy with people – easy to follow, the other narrow and rocky, like a sheep track along a hillside, and quite lonely in places. You can go with the crowd, or dare to be different, take it easy or explore a mountain track. That way you will learn what it means to be really alive.

**Two trees** – two approaches to living. One produces problems and division, thorns and briars to harm, to isolate and divide. The other produces good fruit to share and to unite, to nourish and delight. Choose the fruit you want to produce.

**Two types of people** – one self-centred and using their faith to promote themselves, the other trying to make Jesus their centre and to follow His way. To understand and act on what he is saying. One talks, while the other acts.

**Two builders** – both hear Jesus’ message, both experience rain and wind and flooding – but the difference is the foundation. One has heard Jesus and it has not made any difference to his life, the other has heard and has acted on what he has heard.

Brian McLaren sums this up :

*“Each pair of images challenges us to move beyond mere interest and agreement to commitment and action. And what is the desired action? To take everything Jesus has taught us – all we have considered as we have listened to him here on this hillside. – and translate it into our way of living, our way of being alive.”*

*(Brian McLaren – “We make the road by walking” p 179, Hodder and Stroughton 2014)*

This is probably a good time to review all Jesus said on the hillside – to read again Jesus’ fascinating and challenging teaching – yes it is a good time to do that if you can – maybe get a cup of tea or coffee first!

*“If you were there on that day on the Galilean hillside, what would your decision have been? No doubt you would have been impressed, but would you have said ‘yes’?”*

*(Brian McLaren – “We make the road by walking” p 18, Hodder and Stroughton 2014)*

### **This week’s letter and prayer from Rev Owain Jones:**

Hello, everyone

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It was the funeral a few days ago of the man who was my Minister when I felt my own call to the ministry. was 14 when I went to the Rev. Ieuan Davies as an immensely wise, senior and venerable figure in my life. When I did the sums, I realized that he would have been 36. He gave me Spurgeon’s sound advice to anyone feeling such a call – “If you can, don’t...” – and waited things out with me (and started me on Hebrew!)

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He had a vice-like handshake, and eyes as intense as you could imagine. He was honest to the point of possessing a certain naivete, even

unworldliness; his allotment, on the road back into town from the secondary school in Caernarfon, was next to my father's, and I remember barely managing to suppress hysterical laughter as he waxed lyrical from the pulpit about the joy of hearing young voices calling cheerily to each other as they made their way home; my father had done his national service in the Army, and his recollection of the cheery calls was quite different. But I admired that. We are at pains, properly, to suggest that Christians are not called to be "plaster saints", but genuine, saintly innocence, especially in an intelligent person profoundly engaged in the world, is a beautiful thing, and it made an enormous impression on me.

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He was a scintillating, mesmerizing preacher, who drew on eclectic sources, Tillich, Simone Weil, Berdyaev, Schweitzer, Brunner, and any number of Welsh thinkers you wouldn't have heard of because they are hermetically sealed away in the Welsh language. Yet he wouldn't have counted himself an intellectual. What spoke to him, he retained, and passed on as food for the souls in his care.

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And he loved John's Gospel. Unconstrained by a lectionary, he'd return to it often (too often, some thought, but not I!) and usually worked into his sermon at some point the observation that where the other evangelists are represented, Matthew by a man, Mark by a lion and Luke by an ox, John is represented by the eagle, because the eagle can stare into the sun without blinking.

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When I was 14, contemplating Ieuan Davies gimlet stare, I could almost believe that he could, too. I wonder whether that's where I got the conviction I still hold, that the first moral duty of Christians is to stare unblinkingly at the reality of the world just exactly as it is, and not deny its truth? It seems to me that Jesus' trying to get his disciples to do that is a theme that runs like a red thread through John's Gospel. It's what we are going to have to do, as we emerge from this pandemic into what-comes-next.

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I remember Ieuan preaching on the passage in John 12, which is the lectionary reading for this week (I DO use the lectionary!) in which some Greeks approach the disciples, and say to Philip "Sir, we would see Jesus..." The disciples don't see it, but Jesus does. This is the moment it all

begins, the inexorable pull into the Easter events, into what comes next, which will be profoundly challenging for the disciples, but which is the beginning of the glorification of the Christ – of Christ for the world.

We're preparing for reopening – a second reopening for some congregations, a first for others, a reopening now for some, a "not yet" for others, and each congregation in the Presbytery, supported by all of us, will do what it perceives as responsible and right. There seems to be a widespread feeling that the movement-less stagnation is over, a new process has engaged, and we are being swept in a quickening current. I think that passage from John 12 has something important to say to us.



Owain

**Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. *John 12:20-25***

Let us pray

He is our joy, our delight, our strength.  
His call to follow, and our life of discipleship  
is meaning, and the purpose that frames our living.  
But Jesus' is the difficult call  
to follow him into all truth,  
to stare unblinkingly into its dazzling light.  
for you, immeasurable God, are light and truth.

We find ourselves saying “Was it really a year ago?”  
 We look back, and we pray  
 for those who grieve - as we ourselves grieve -  
 for what has been lost:  
 the time within the pandemic envelope of a bitter year,  
 events, and rites of passage,  
 the irrecoverable, unexperienced experiences  
 that should have been.

And here we are, still waiting to emerge,

If we thought, Lord,  
 that our passage from COVID to post-pandemic  
 would be the crossing of a sharp, defining line,  
 we are disabused.

We pray for those who are not disabused – not yet:  
 for those who wait for a future that is a return to the past,  
 and that will never come.  
 We pray for those who struggle all the more, now,  
 because of what seems, more and more,  
 almost within reach,  
 yet simultaneously seems to recede.  
 We pray for those who confuse hope with unrealistic wishing  
 as we, at times, have done.

And yet, there is movement, and emergence, and hope.

All through this year, in the course of this strangest of years,  
 there have been those who said for the first time in ages, or ever,  
 “We would see Jesus.”  
 “We would see Jesus on YouTube and Facebook.”  
 “We would see Jesus on Zoom, reflected in your communion with him

which is your communion with each other. May we venture in?"

"We would see Jesus

in the out-reaching love

with which a congregation without the internet,

in sermons and reflections, letters and leaflets,

offers to show him to us."

We have seen these things with amazement, boundless, boundary-less  
God.

this thirst for God, and Christ, and meaning, and hope.

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"Sir, we would see Jesus..."

Those Greeks - Philip had to bring them in from outside,  
through the huddle of followers and disciples.

Before this strangest of years

that isolated us from each other,

but propelled us with the Gospel out into the world,

did we surrounded him with a holy scrum?

did we fuss over him as though he was ours alone?

We spoke of a church without walls;

were we the walls that hid Jesus from the world?

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Forgive us, Lord.

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"We would see Jesus..." "The hour has come..."

Not "Let us in" but "Bring him out for us."

To our astonishment, this has happened.

Lord, let us hear these words

as comfort, grace, forgiveness, recommissioning –

for folk have looked to us,

and we have been able to show them Jesus.

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Teach us, as Jesus taught his disciples

that those words – "We would see Jesus" –

mark the point at which new movement begins,

a new direction is assumed,  
the present is grasped by your purpose  
which tugs it into itself.  
You draw us out of stagnation,  
into the challenge, complexity and pain of the future  
to be surprised by joy.

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Now the hour has come, for the world wants to see Jesus.  
Our road leads from here into the fulfilment of your purpose,  
and our journey is underway.

You draw us out into the reality of the world  
to engage with it in the hope of the Kingdom.

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How shall we work for the healing of our communities, our society?  
You call us to cultivate the hope you have planted  
in those who are drawn to Christ -  
who come to us, and say "We would see Jesus..."

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We pray for each other, and our congregations in Argyll.  
As we wrestle, in our different settings and contexts  
with the ambiguity in which we live - bless us,  
and let us bless each other with the loving support of this Presbytery  
in the different solutions we find  
in the light of our situations,  
in the light of the insight you give,  
and in our determination to seek your will  
and do it, faithfully, where we are.

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We pray for each other...

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We pray for our congregations and our Presbytery...

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We pray for the communities in which we live and witness...

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We thank you for the renewal of hope, and the return of a sense of  
movement...

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We pray for those who are anxious and afraid as the world begins to change again...

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We pray for all whose needs we know...

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We pray that we may be at the disposal of all who say to us, with or without words, "We want to see Jesus..."

And as he taught us, so we pray: Our Father...

**You can find news on our church website: [www.northknapdale.org](http://www.northknapdale.org)**

**And our Face Book page – North Knapdale Church.**

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