

## Andrew's Farewell Sermon 25<sup>th</sup> June 2017

**Jeremiah 20: 7-13; Matthew 10: 24-39**

**So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.**

The other night I was waiting for a bus on Fountainbridge in Edinburgh, the area where Sean Connery famously worked as a milkman for St Cuthbert's Store. And in fact I was standing right opposite the old St Cuthbert's building, built in the co-op's Victorian heyday. Carved into the stonework was an inspiring biblical message "As you sow, so shall you reap". That was clearly meant to motivate you to be prudent and save your pennies – which brought back memories of going to St Cuthbert's to shop for my Mum, and her store dividend number which I can remember to this day: 96101. I can struggle to remember my mobile phone number some times, but my Mum's divi number from fifty-odd years ago remains. Anyway, "be prudent" was the message.

But inscribed in the stonework was another message, much more prominent, much more important, which so touched me I actually took a photograph of it with my phone. It read in old Scots: "Hae God, hae all". If you have God, you have everything.

St Francis used to echo that thought in his prayers when he could be heard crying out: My God and my all. He'd also tell his followers: When he is our all, he also is our peace. So: Hae God, hae all. If you have God, you have everything.

When I was a student back in the seventies I can remember an elderly pastor coming to talk to us in the Christian Union and he said that God never leaves his Church, any Church, without whatever and whoever they need to live and witness effectively, powerfully even, to do that shouting from the housetops which Jesus is talking about in our Gospel. In any Church everything that is needed is already there.

That was the faith which inspired me to come here four years ago, the absolute conviction that God could do with us, working together, more than we could even begin to imagine. Jeremiah talks about his faith in God as being like a fire burning within that just can't be held in. It's a compulsion, it's a love affair. Today's translation has Jeremiah saying: O Lord you have enticed me; but others say: O Lord, you have seduced me. It's that kind of an affair. The love that doesn't let go, compels, impels, draws you to itself.

We may think we have shown up Sunday after Sunday for years out of a sheer dogged faithfulness through good times and bad – and there will have been (I know there's been) – times when it's probably felt like that. But it's love that's drawn us all here – you and me and all of us – nothing else, and nothing less. Why else would you do it?

But I think, I know, that God drew me here to show me – with you – what love looks like when a community opens itself up to receive the new thing that he's always ready to do for us - building on the old, faithful to the best of the past, but open to a future which has contained more new things than we could ever have thought possible.

Only love, love for God, love for each other and trust in God's love, could have enabled us to merge two congregations and two traditions, attract and welcome new members, leave our building for more than a year, increase our giving year after year, become flexible about our worship, trust our leadership with such significant decisions (and our Vestry has shown so much courage), to bring us to a place where we're looking forward to our first fulltime minister in thirty years. If this is not the work of the Spirit of our loving God, I don't know what is. Behold, I am doing a new thing, says God. Isn't that the truth?

As a minister, and, I admit, an incurable optimist, I guess I always have some sort of dream or fantasy about how I hope things might turn out for any congregation I serve, but here what you have done together, what you've shown me, what you've made possible by faith, love and incredible hard work has been more than I could ever have imagined.

The writer and singer Leonard Cohen has a phrase which describes that sense that in any situation there is more going on, there is more possibility than meets the naked eye: He writes: God is alive – magic is afoot. God is alive, magic is afoot. Ever since someone told me that I've been seeing the world slightly differently. Whatever is going on, however things might look, however complicated life's challenges might be for us, beneath the surface, beneath the surface of our struggles and our worries, God is alive. Beneath your personal struggles, beneath the Church's life with all its preoccupations about everything from "what colour shall we paint the walls?" to "do we marry same sex couples in Church?" beneath all of it, holy magic is afoot. And magic is afoot because God is alive.

Hae God, hae all. If we have God, we have everything. You've shown God to me in so many ways: in love, in people's courage through illness and bereavement, in your care for each other (which is second to none – and done with great tenderness and without fanfare of any kind), in forgiveness for the times when I've not been the priest you needed or not noticed what you needed – something I don't take for granted, because no Christian ministry can exist without it, in coping with my latest crazy idea for where we might go next, and for being generous enough to have a sense of humour to hold us all together through so much change.

You know, the only task of a priest, really, is to point towards God, in good times and hard times, at all times – but equally you turn me towards God daily, every day and I bless you for that. This is, you are, an amazing family of people. O Lord you have seduced me, and I have been seduced? I sometimes take God to task for some of the decisions I've made in my life, like I should blame God for some of the dumber things I've done. "Lord, that's another fine mess you've gotten me into". But not this one. Like the wine at the wedding at Cana, God has saved the best wine for last. In what is almost certainly my last appointment as a rector, I leave with nothing but gratitude and love and a sense of real awe at what you are and who you are and what you have done. And I can't wait to see what happens next. Jesus says, even the hairs of your head are counted, so do not be afraid.

God is alive, magic is afoot. Hae God, hae all. In him, in his love, and in each other, may you have everything. Amen.