

The gentleness of Jesus

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone. Lovely to be here with you. My name is Alan McWilliam and I am a friend of your minister.

! So I will just confess that right now so you understand where some of these stories are coming from. I went to Trinity College years ago with Gordon and we finished our studies at the same time and went to probation.

Gordon and I have been part of a very august body ever since which is called the UNO Society. Now the UNO Society is not the United Nations Organisation Society. That is not what it is. It is in actual fact the name of the little group of about ten of us who graduated together and we went through probation. And because probation conferences were not that exciting, in the evenings we would entertain ourselves, shall we say, with a game of UNO.

And I want you to know that your minister is, well I was going to say a cheat, that's not fair. Robustly competitive as far as the UNO is concerned.

[1 : 14] And I'm not going to say who did it, but I'm just going to say that we have played once and there were some breakages. Okay, some furniture was broken at one point.

Anyway, Gordon went off and did various things and I went off back to Glasgow. I actually did my probation here just along the road in Holy Trinity in Western Hills. So we went back to Glasgow and in 1993 was ordained as the Associate Minister in Scottson and White Inch Parish Church.

Very quickly after that we began aware of the fact that actually we really needed to do something in the White Inch end of the parish. We found out after having done a survey in 1994-95 that there were six people out of 4,800, six, who came to the parish church.

So we reckoned that at that point it was time for us to do something different. My job therefore was to start a new church in White Inch and so I became what was described as a new church development minister.

And so from 1996, six of us started the church in White Inch and was there until 2019. And during that time the church grew from six of us to 180 and the average age was about 22.

[2 : 31] So quite a dynamic young community of faith. And during that time, because of the fact that I was involved in doing this thing, we had people coming to ask us the question, how do you start new churches in the Church of Scotland?

And the answer was, we don't really know. We're kind of making it up as we're going along. And that is true, I think, for quite a lot of the people who were involved at that time. The pattern of kind of new church development was just really being established at that point.

And so what we found was that for most of the time we really just shared what we knew. And gradually people began to kind of come and they asked, can you teach us about this?

And so from 2003 on, we ran the course, which Gordon referred to, the Forge course, which is a church planting year-long course, helping people to start new mission projects and new churches all over Scotland.

And in the last 23 years, we've trained 330 folks who have gone on to start about 185 new churches and mission projects and other activities all over Scotland.

[3 : 39] And it's been a real privilege to do that. And that's really what then eventually moved me into the work that I do now, which is to lead Cairn Movement. Cairn Movement essentially is a missionary organisation in Scotland.

So we are looking to start new activity, sharing the gospel with people who do not know anything about Jesus Christ. And for those of us who have been part of the church for a long time, that seems a strange thing to say.

But the reality is that actually, even in the best indicators are that only something like 8% of the Scottish population actually are actively engaged in faith.

And you would think that the 92% who aren't, well, for many of them, you may think, well, they've had a chance. They've heard the stories of Jesus. But the reality is that increasingly now, as you move down the generations, what's happening is that actually if you're really over the, or under the age of about 40, you're now in the situation where people are just simply, they do not know the gospel message anymore.

They've never heard it explained. Very, very few of them, even in school, are not getting that experience. And so we're in a missionary setting, a missionary society. And so essentially the work that I do is to help people to do that.

[4 : 57] And most of what we do is starting new things. So 70% is really around the church planting stuff. But about 30% of what we do is actually about helping churches like this church and all other churches around Scotland to help us to answer three big questions.

How can we mobilize everybody into all-member ministry? So how can we get people involved and engaged? How can we help to raise up new leaders who can help us to step into mission in our community?

And then the third thing is, how do we help people to know how to share our faith today so that those who don't know can come and join our fellowship? And that's really the work that we do through our learning communities.

And interestingly, I was driving past and I realized Sam Torns, who's the guy that leads the work that we do in this area, the learning communities, of course, is a neighboring minister down here. So Sam leads learning communities and helps people in different churches to do that.

So that's really what I've been doing for the last, well, since 2019. And it's been a real privilege just to be able to sort of see what has been going on all over Scotland.

[6 : 07] And I'm happy to, well, I realized that actually, I was going to say, I'm happy to stay at the end and have a chat, but I realize I'm getting turfed out with my coffee outside with everybody else so that you can have your business meeting.

Anyway, maybe another chance you can kind of get on our website. Cairn Movement is the name of the website. So here we are. We've just had Easter. We've just had the resurrection.

And now we're on to this story in John chapter 21. It's a strange story. It's a strange story because actually the period between Jesus' resurrection and his ascension is 40 days.

So this story comes, we don't quite know where, but a week after, two weeks after, three weeks after, Peter and the others have seen Jesus risen from the dead and have actually experienced him in the room.

And yet, here we have Peter going back to the fishing, going back to the familiar, going back to the thing that he had was comfortable, that was easy, going back to his old ways.

[7 : 13] And it's a strange thing because you kind of think, hey, hang on a second. Have you not just seen Jesus rise from the dead? Have you not just experienced this incredible kind of amazing, wonderful good news?

And yet, here you are. It feels as though you're running away. It feels as though you're hiding. It feels as though you're going, as I say, back to the familiar. And I think that's a really, really interesting kind of experience because I think that actually what we see as we encounter Peter, because it would be easy for us to say, oh, well, this is really just about his restoration.

It was about what happened, you know, on the night that Jesus was taken and he betrayed him. And that was it. And we think, oh, well, maybe it's really just about that. But I want to sort of say, I don't think you get to where Peter was just off one instant.

I actually think that there's a whole series of things that led up to Peter saying, even though I've seen the resurrected Jesus, there's something deeply wrong in my relationship and connection with him.

And I'm not sure that I want to go forward together in the way that I thought I had. And so actually what you see in the story of Peter and the restoration story and the encounter that Jesus had with his disciples and with Peter, I think was just an incredibly, wonderfully kind and gentle restoration.

[8 : 42] Never once in the scripture do you hear the words from Peter's mouth saying, I'm sorry. He didn't. That's not what happened.

That's not where this starts. It's actually not included. Because actually what we have is the gracious intervention of Jesus in the life of one of his friends to bring not just simply the restoration from the betrayal on the night that he was taken and was crucified.

But I think that he was doing a deeper work, a deeper healing work in the life of his friend and his follower. I want to tell you about, really about kind of my experience of being a minister.

So as I say, I was born, I was, I'm not going to tell you I was born, that'll take us too far back. I was ordained in 93 and so I've been a minister for a while now.

And the new charge in Whiteinch started in 1996. And actually it was a great experience. I mean, it basically, they sort of said, there's Whiteinch.

[9 : 58] We don't have a building. We don't have any money. We only have, there's a team of maybe six of you. Off you go. And that was it.

That was the plan. And genuinely, we learned how to do it as we went along. We made some absolute whopping. I actually almost got arrested by the police for prayer walking one night.

I was walking around with a bunch of young adults, young guys. And the police literally had us up against the wall. Sort of like, you know, with these guys behind us. Right, tell us what you're doing. Or praying. All right, okay. Very strange. Lots of different experiences. So we were involved in doing that. We did sort of children's work. We did youth work. We did holiday clubs. We did six weeks, excuse me, during the summer holiday club.

The whole summer holiday. We were absolutely wiped out. I won't say what happened. Anyway, we were wiped out at the end of all of that. But it was a great experience.

[10 : 57] And we saw lots and lots of folks hearing the good news for the first time. We were involved in schools. We were involved in the community council. We were involved in the housing association. We were involved in a housing project.

Or rather, a building project. Interestingly, while all the rest of the Church of Scotland new charge developments were invited to buy a plot of land and build a new building. And the Church of Scotland offered us £25,000 to pay for a PA system in the new White Inch Centre.

Thank you very much. One to one George Street. Anyway, we did that. We were involved in all of those things. And by the time that it got to about 2008, so after about 12 years, having done all these sort of things, we had got to a certain stage.

And I suppose what I want to say is this. I had got to a stage where I was a bit unsure as to whether or not I really wanted to continue doing the work that I was doing. And there's a variety of different reasons for that.

But let me tell you about the numbers. So as I said at the beginning, we grew from 6 to 180 over the period of time that we were there. But here's the numbers on a year-by-year basis of members in the Church.

[12 : 10] In 1996, we started with a team of 6. At the end of the first year, there were 9 of us. Then there were 15. Then 20. In year 4, 22.

Year 5, 22. Year 6, 22. Year 7, 25. By the time we got to 8 years in, we had grown from 6 of us to 25 members.

And I was frustrated. And I was a bit annoyed. I was annoyed at God, to be honest. Because I just thought, hey, hang on a second. We have been knocking our pans out here.

We've been working hard. We've been doing everything that we can possibly do. We have done everything. And yet, there's only 25. Well, there were more than that. But 25 members at that point. And I couldn't work out what was going on.

I was really, really confused by that experience. And more than that, I suppose, the thing that was difficult was that, I suppose really the thing was, it was, we'd prayed prayers.

[13 : 19] And we'd had expectations. And we believed that God was telling us, oh, we're going to do this and that. And things hadn't come through. And then we'd had people who would come and they would say things like, oh, we love this church.

We love the new church and the fact that you're doing new things. And we're here and we're part of what God, God has called us to be with you. And then six months later, they would say, God has called us to go somewhere else now.

And so we're just going to leave. Thank you very much. And off we go. And for some of us who have been there for all that time, the sense of abandonment and betrayal with that was really, really hard.

And I suppose the other thing I want to say to you, I can say this to you because, you know, sheep bite is a real thing. You know, ministers, pastors, shepherds of the flock, we get bitten by the sheep quite a lot.

And that had happened to me. And do you know the worst thing about that? It's not actually when somebody says something about you. It's actually when they say it to your wife or even worse, to your children.

[14 : 24] And that's actually what happened. And for a period of time, I got, you know, I just got to the stage where I was exhausted. I was exhausted physically, mentally, spiritually.

And I'd been through all sorts of different things. And different things had happened. And I just felt, I suppose what I felt was I felt a bit of a failure. You know, I'd been working at this.

And, you know, all these people were sort of saying, oh, look at you doing this new thing. And they'd come to us and train you in how to be church planters and all this kind of stuff. And you looked around and you're, there are 25 of us. Hang on a second.

That's one, two, three, four, five rows. That was us after seven or eight years. And I just felt, you know, at that point, I can't do this anymore.

And I wonder whether or not you can hear some of the echoes in the story of Peter. Betrayal. Betrayal. Abandonment. A bit of sheep bite.

[15 : 25] Exhaustion. Spiritually. Physically. Mentally. Failure, definitely. And I think that when he got to the, when he got to the point where, you know, all the excitement of Jesus rising from the dead and he'd seen all of that.

When he got to all of that. I think he just, and the natural thing would have been to say, right. Just say sorry and move on. But I don't think he was able to do that.

Because I think there was something much more deeply in, in, in his heart and his spirit and his mind that needed to be restored. I actually think that he needed something of an experience of the grace of God, the kindness of God, that would allow him to be transformed.

And that's really what he comes to. So what happened to me in 2008 was I went on sabbatical. And we went to Mozambique. We went to a place called Pemba in Mozambique to Iris Ministries.

And we went because of, um, Dan and I, and our, we actually took our kids. They were nine and eleven at that point. And we took, um, and we went for three reasons. So the first one was I wanted to go because they had seen 10,000 churches planted out of this base in an eleven year period.

[16 : 41] And I was looking at it going, that cannot be possible. If it is, I'd like to know how that happens. Um, so I'm kind of looking at these 25 people and they've done 10,000 churches. And, and my sense of failure is ramping up quite radically at that point.

Anyway, went to go and see that. Dan wanted to go. She's a community development worker. And so she, she was really, she's full of the compassion of God. And she wants to, and, and they were really doing great work with widows and orphans and orphanages and schools and nurseries and hospitals.

And they were making an incredible impact. So that was the reason she wanted to go. But the, and then third one was that there were loads of stories, as you hear from Africa, of people encountering God in miraculous ways.

People who were blind being able to see. People who were, you know, ill being healed. And just stuff that you read in the Bible. And you thought, wow, that cannot still be happening today, can it? And we wanted to go and to see that.

And that's what we did. So we went off and we, and we went to the, to this place. And there were about 120 people in our school. And most of them were, I would sort of say, 18 to 22 year old American girls.

[17 : 48] Most of them. And I want you to know that for almost all of the time at the beginning, I absolutely hated the experience. I was the grumpy old man at the back.

Who looked at these little girls as I saw them, dancing about and getting all excited and dancing with wee African kids and all that kind of stuff. And I just thought, you know nothing.

You know nothing at all. You have no experience. You have no understanding of what's actually going on here. You know. I literally despised these girls.

I really, I have had to repent and had to apologise to them. But, for the first four weeks really, I was just so cynical. So bitter. So, so done in.

So angry. And disappointed and confused. And all the rest of it. I actually remember before I left. This is a terrible thing to say, but it's true. I remember before I left, I actually, I actually said to God, God, I can't leave the church.

[18:53] Because I know that this is the only way that I have to live. You know, it was a bit like Peter when he, Jesus said to him, will you also leave? And Peter said, where can we go, Lord? You have the words of eternal life.

It was a bit like that. And I kind of said, I can't leave. But I want you to know, and this is a terrible thing. This relationship is now a professional relationship. And I meant it.

I'm only here because I have to be. Not because I want to. And there's something, something quite awful, isn't there, about that.

About getting to the stage where you're, you kind of, you think, I don't want this anymore. Anyway, off to Mozambique. And these annoying girls.

Anyway, during the class, what happened was that there were different people coming through over the different weeks. And this guy called Bob, Bob Johnson, came. And he was a strange man.

[19:56] He was, you know, he was kind of, it was, the tradition of the air was it's kind of charismatic Pentecostal. So you had all sorts of people doing all sorts of strange things. And this man, in the middle of preaching his sermon, which was strange, I thought, stopped and pointed at me and said, God wants to speak to you about your heart condition.

And I'm looking around and thinking, me? I don't think so. At this point, I'm kind of like quite annoyed and quite aggressive. I'm quite, you know, you really want to have a go at me?

Come on then. You've never met an angry Scotsman before, obviously. Right. Whatever. Let's have it. And he spoke with such kindness. And he spoke with such gentleness. And he spoke about, you know, about how God wanted to bring hope again.

And wanted to kind of speak about a future again. And he pointed towards certain things that he wanted to do in my life. And I left. And he'd said a few things that really kind of resonated.

But I just kind of thought, what does he know? He doesn't know anything about me. And he doesn't know what I've been through. Shut up. Walked off. Anyway, next week.

[21:07] Next speaker. Exactly the same thing happened. A guy called Bob Ekblad. Bob does the same thing. Points at me. Says, I think that God wants to speak to you about the condition of your heart.

And this is what he wants to speak about. The hope and the future. These are the things when you go back home, he's going to use you to do this and this and this and this. And by that point, I was kind of slightly paying attention.

Because I was a wee bit kind of freaked out about being picked out in that way. Anyway, week three. The annoying girls had thought that actually, if they came and sat kind of close beside me, maybe the speaker would pick them.

You know, slightly. Not just that guy, but the girls beside me. Same thing happened. Third week. Another speaker, different person. Completely different person came and said almost exactly the same thing.

Picked me out. You know, it was at this point becoming funny. You know, they were all expecting it. And the person said, I think I have a word for someone who's part of this school.

[22:13] At which point, they were all kind of pointing at me. But that guy there, the annoying Scottish guy. There you go. Happened then. And then happened a fourth time. The next week again. So in four weeks, four different speakers.

None of them knowing each other. None of them knowing me. All came and spoke about a hope and a future. And about the things that God wanted to do in my life as I kind of came away from that time. And I think that probably it was at that point that something broke inside me.

Something of the kind of the hardness of heart. The bitterness of spirit. The cynicism that was there. Just the weariness of soul. And I remember breaking down and crying.

You know, after the fourth one had picked me out. It was slightly funny, but slightly just. It was just one of these incredible things. I'd never come across it.

And I still haven't come across it since. And actually what was happening was. God was coming to me with hope. And he was speaking about opportunity.

[23:14] And he was speaking about what was going to happen. And he was showing kindness to me. Once again, I want to say the word that never came out of my mouth before he spoke was, I'm

sorry.

I was still, I've had enough of you. This is a professional relationship. And in my rebellion. And in my rebellion. And in my brokenness.

And in my arrogance. And in my kind of just pride. God broke in. Do you know, it's the kindness of God that leads to repentance.

It's the kindness of God that changes our lives. And I think it was the kindness of God that transformed Peter's life that day. He didn't need to be.

He didn't need to be kind of told about his weakness and his stupidity and his failures. And how could you have said that? And how could you have done that? And what were you thinking about? He didn't need to be told any of those things.

[24 : 23] What happened was, it was the kindness of God. The gentleness of Jesus coming alongside him. That actually just lifted layer upon layer upon layer of brokenness from his heart.

I love, there's a verse in Ezekiel 36 verse 26 that talks about this. It says that the Lord says, I will come and I will remove from you your heart of stone.

And I will place a heart of flesh within you. And I will fill you again with my Holy Spirit. And certainly that was my experience when I was there in Pemba.

And it was undoubtedly the experience that Peter had on that day. I want to say that coming home from Pemba wasn't easy. Because people still abandoned me and disappointed me.

I still get bitten now and again by the sheep. And I still didn't do everything right. But I know that the God of kindness had changed my heart and perspective.

[25 : 34] And so perhaps, you know, there was something about stepping into some of these amazing things that God said he was going to do. Which have had, have happened since those years back in 2008.

That have been incredible. And I want to say this. That actually, I think that that's where Peter's life for the rest of his, you know, what followed.

That's where it kind of, that's where everything changed. Because in that moment, it wasn't just a, as I say, it wasn't just an encounter that was about putting right the betrayal in the night.

There was a deep heart surgery that happened there. A deep transformation of the way that he saw himself and understood himself. Which stopped him from the, the, the, the real problem, which could have been this.

That he could have simply said, I'm just going to do enough. I'm just going to be, I will follow you because I can't go anywhere else. But I'm going to do the things that are familiar and comforting and that I can control.

[26 : 38] I'm going to go back to the fishing. I'm going to go back to the things that are easy. And I think that one of the biggest challenges for us and the biggest, yeah, the greatest invitations that we have is this.

That actually, it's not that, it's not that we, it's not that we are going to abandon our faith. Because we're settled in our faith. We're committed. But I, I think about that kind of passage that is in Revelation 3 where Jesus is speaking to the church in Laodicea.

And he said, you know, you're not cold and you're not hot. You just look warm. And I, and I know that in my heart, that thing of just the mediocrity of just existing in a place where our faith just bubbles along.

And actually, it's fine. But it, it isn't the fire that we once experienced. It isn't the first love that God called us to. It isn't the kingdom adventures that actually he wants for us.

And I want all of that. And I, and the thing about it is that God wants that for all of us too. And that's why this passage is here. It's actually a passage about, about inviting us to come and follow him full on.

[27 : 57] Not, not, not allowing the familiar, the comfortable, the controlled pattern of faith to, to, to allow us, uh, to dominate that, our, our lives.

But instead, to recognize that actually, when we got to the place where we kind of just said, you know, this is, this is, this is, that it's this far and no further Jesus. If we've said that at any point, Jesus is here.

And his kindness and his kindness and his grace is available to us to speak about a different way, to speak about a different way of living and a different passion. And an invitation, uh, to come and to follow him and to allow ourselves to step into a greater passion, a greater commitment, a greater

determination, uh, in all the things that he has called us to.

I love the story of, uh, uh, Jesus walking along. He's going to go to pray for Jairus, his daughter. And the woman in the, in the crowd reaches out and touches Jesus in the hem of his garment and she's healed. And I love that story because I think about it as we, as we meet in a, as a, as a congregation today.

[29 : 16] And I love the fact that actually by faith, Jesus is walking here in this room and you can have that encounter with him just as that woman did too.

By faith, just metaphorically, but you know, just by reaching out and touching the hem of his garment, he is here and he can, he can, if, if you need that heart exchange, if you feel as though, like I had, you know, that, that, that hardness of heart, that cynicism, that bitterness, any of those things, the promise from Ezekiel is for you.

You know, he promises this, I will remove from you your heart of stone and I will put a heart of flesh within you and I will fill you with my Holy Spirit. So today, just as we draw to our close, I want to invite you just to be quiet and to reflect on where your heart is with God today.

And if that's what you want, by faith, reach out, he's here, reach out, ask him, new heart Lord, remove my hardness of heart, remove any cynicism, anything that stops me from just being, that stops a kind of mediocrity and a lukewarmness because I don't want it anymore.

Let's pray. Jesus, we thank you that you're walking here in this room.

[30 : 56] Thank you for the folks that are watching this online. You're in those rooms too.

And we recognize, Lord, that it's easy, it's easy to actually get to the point where we take our faith for granted and we just allow it to dull down the passion, the passion that we once had, the commitment that we once made, the promises that we made to you and that you made to us and the invitation to kingdom adventures that we once had.

It seems so far away. And yet today you speak again and you do not condemn us. You do not condemn us. You speak the word of love and kindness to us.

You are the one who invites us into a new and living way. Thank you, Lord, that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Just that line that we sang at the beginning of the service. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. But where your spirit comes to convict us and bring us into that place where we know that we need that encounter with you.

[32 : 21] I pray now for my sisters and brothers, that every one of them that feels that hardness of heart, that lukewarmness of spirit. Lord God, I pray that you would remove that hardness, that bitterness, that cynicism, Lord God, that mediocrity of faith.

And instead you would give us again a heart of flesh and you would place your Holy Spirit within us. Lord, do not pass us by this day.

And in faith we reach out and we touch the hem of your garment and we ask for this moment of transformation. This transformation that comes as a result of your goodness and kindness and love. We ask, Lord God, that you would have your way. Lord, we pray that you would do this now. In Jesus' name. Amen.