

Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus!

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[0 : 0 0] remember back in 1989, the 3rd of February 1989 to be exact, Princess Diana visited Harlem Hospital in New York and she caused quite a stir to say the least. And that was because she spent time with AIDS victims and that was a time when there was much prejudice and misinformation about the disease. And there was a famous picture where she hugged a young boy and she was breaking all sorts of social and royal taboos. And maybe if you're a fan of the Netflix series The Crown, I've not seen it, just saw the clip, but that was really powerfully reenacted and you may have seen that, I think it was season 4 when she did it. And we're, I guess, 35 years on from that, we're a generation on from that moment, maybe we're less aware of the stir that it caused, maybe you do remember it and have the particular impact that that one hospital visit had. Maybe nowadays we've become sort of desensitised to that sort of thing because, well, there's lots of different other news events going on, there's been lots of other things that happen, even in the midst of checking out the BBC news website or watching the news, lots of other items that seem to take up a lot of our capacity to really engage with one singular issue. And maybe today, more than we did 30 or so years ago, we quickly move on and we don't give as much thought as we might want to have as to how truly revolutionary something can be. So Lady Di's actions were really, truly revolutionary that day, as was our campaigning throughout that period. Perhaps also what we've, in our society now, is that we've become desensitised to or we can overlook, is that her particular attitude towards those suffering with AIDS, those who are seen as outcasts of society and those that she also campaigned for, the poor and the sick and the downtrodden, that it's so much a part of our own common sense attitude to people nowadays that we would help those in need that we've forgotten that it's actually the fruit of being Christian and having Christian models, Christian values and the influence of Christianity in the Western world. And yes, we may live now in a post-Christian society and in Scotland, a post-Christian country where about 2 or 3% attend church on a Sunday. But our values, our morals and our way of looking at the world and helping people and breaking those taboos are certainly Christian, whether we realise it or not, whether we've been desensitised to it or taken it for granted or got distracted by other things. And so this morning we're going to be zoning in on the theme of fixing our eyes on Jesus. And the title of this sermon was inspired very much by young Dean's words to us last week when I invited him up and shared, what can we pray for you and what are the things that our teenagers struggle with today? And he said that it was distractions and he responded that he would ask for prayer for him to help keep his eyes fixed on Jesus. And I thought it was just so wonderfully put. And I think that is something that's maybe true for each and every one of us. I know it's certainly true for myself. There was many distractions around in our world today. And to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus is the very best thing we can do.

So as I told him when I met with him this week, this is your sermon, Dean. And so we're going to approach things this way. This is a three-point sermon this morning. And hopefully it's not going to be too long. And it's the famous last words got out, but I don't think it is.

So approaching things in this slide, three points. Firstly, Jesus' mission and ministry, his particular focus and what ours is going to be. Secondly, Jesus' joy and our joy and what's the ambition of Jesus' hearts and what's our ambition. And then lastly, Jesus' invitation, his perseverance and our own perseverance. So it may be that God empowers us and ministers to us by his spirit and that we would seek his presence and send his presence among us as people who will be focused, ambitious and persevere for Jesus' glory.

So the first reading we have from Mark's Gospel. And Mark's Gospel out of the four Gospels is the shortest. It's so fast-paced. It's like he's going on, you know, one thing to the next and he hardly takes a breather. And in chapter two, he's following on from Jesus healing a paralyzed man who's come through the roof of the house. Famous Sunday school story moving to many of us.

[4 : 43] And now Jesus has gone out in the lake and a large crowd have come to him. And just as in the opening of Mark's Gospel, in the beginning of his ministry, Jesus is proclaiming the good news of God.

And in verse 13 of chapter two, we read that he began to teach the people. Jesus is ministering to them by sharing God's truth. He's demonstrating to them that there's a different way of living and he's going to show them this. And as he's teaching them, he sees this man called Levi, who's to be called Matthew. He's a tax collector. He's someone who made the rich and himself richer and the poor who became poorer. And that was due to the corrupt system that was in place at the time.

And so Levi, Matthew, he's sitting at his booth. And Jesus, just as he would for the four fishermen that he called, Andrew, Simon Peter, James and John, the lads of thunder, he tells Levi, come, follow me.

And similar to what we find in the story of Zacchaeus, which we thought last week in the family service that we had, Zacchaeus being a fellow HMRC specialist, Jesus has dinner at Matthew's house as well.

I wonder if it was something connected there, that they had dinner together. And what we find is that as they're having dinner, many other tax collectors are in the presence of Jesus. Many other sinners, in inverted commas, with all sorts of different backgrounds, would eat with him.

[6 : 05] And lest we forget that his disciples and other various followers were there too. It must have been a crowded place. But yet he was also there but the supposed Bible experts of the day called the Pharisees.

And this is where we see Jesus breaking his own particular social taboo of the day. And the Pharisees see him breaking this taboo by eating with people who are called sinners, by eating with the likes of Levi and other tax collectors.

And they see this and rather than thinking, okay, what is he saying about God? What is he saying about who God is and what God has done? And about the stories of Moses and Elijah and all of these people.

They question what Jesus is doing by breaking this taboo. And they get distracted by this. And they say, well, how can he break tradition? How can he do this? Who does he think he is?

And are we going to let him blatantly get away with this and hang out with those who he shouldn't be going anywhere near? And it can be easy for us to think, well, I know that. I know that story. I know that story pretty well.

[7 : 10] But actually, just how radical Jesus is, what he did here, what his mission was, and how he really went after those who were really paid no attention to many people in the world.

And this is where we see Jesus focusing on his attention. Verse 17. It's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners. And in Matthew's Gospel, in Matthew's version of it, where the story takes place in chapter 9, Jesus would add this, taken from the prophet Hosea in the Old Testament, go and learn what this means.

You know, it's not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners. Go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. And we, of course, we sing quite often, mercy is more than our sins, saving many as mercy is more.

And the word mercy is about not getting what we do deserve, which is, well, just to put it bluntly, the full-blown wrath and fury of God for our sin.

And regardless of our social status, what we've done, whether we're a hardened criminal, a murderer, or whether we've, you know, just said a few naughty words in our day, we're all on the same standing, Jesus says.

[8 : 26] And what we don't deserve is God's mercy. But what Jesus is saying is, I desire mercy. And this is the way of God. The way of God is mercy. It's about God's faithfulness and God's love to us.

That because God is so rich in mercy, here's what God does. This is what Jesus is saying. Here's what God does. He's taken all our sins. Whether we've murdered someone or done something really bad, or whether we've said a few naughty words and watched Still Gave a few times.

You know, you can say that's a sin, you know what I mean. Whether we've done something like that. Whether, what level we place sin that God says, well, we're all on the same level. And here's what God has done.

When we put our trust in Jesus, he's taken all our sins. And because of his mercy, he's chosen to put them in a big bag and to throw them into the sea, into the bottom of the deep sea that you can never imagine.

And they will never be recovered again. That's what Jesus' mission is, to show mercy. And these sins will never be discovered again. And God has chosen to do this for us in and through his son, Jesus.

[9 : 26] And so Jesus is saying that his mission and ministry, his focus, is to get alongside those in society who are deemed by others as sinful or sinners, and who have loads of baggage on them.

And so for Jesus, the taboo of his day, that's the focus of his life and ministry. Or certainly one of the key focuses. And I wonder for today, many of those who might look at church, look at a building like this with a huge steeple, and think, wow, I'm sure there's a load of history in that building.

But I wonder if I could go in that building. Maybe they think, church, for me, is taboo. It's a place where I'm going to come in and I'm going to get judged, either by the preacher at the front or by others instead of welcomes.

And the church is a place where, well, if I bring my kids here, then they're going to be told to be quiet just like I was when I was a child, and I'll be given a sweetie so that, you know, what a distraction. Rather than the children are accepted just as they are with their noises and with their children.

The church is going to be a place where I need to dress up, wear my Sunday best, rather than just show up at the door. And the church is maybe another place where I'm going to put on yet another mask and pretend to be a person who has it all together, but the reality is I'm a mess inside.

[10 : 47] Now, I say this because this has been rather common feedback from people that I chat to in our town, and I ask their honest opinion on church. And even just recently on the back of a summer club, of our summer club, which was a great blessing, and on the Friday barbecue, one of the parents had speak to me and said, I was thinking of coming on Sunday, but will it be okay to bring the kids?

Of course it will be. Of course it can. We'd love to have them having a special family service. But will they be told to be quiet? Of course not. And you would see that this kind of thinking is commonplace.

You know, because when I was a child, I was told, you know, you have to behave this way, then my child's going to be that way. And so church has become taboo. And so I wanted to ask myself and ask ourselves this morning, what's our focus for this church?

What is church to us? And why did we come here? Why? They stopped saying, why do you bother to come to church this morning? Why do we come? Why do we come to church? And just to hold that question, hold that thought there before a preacher answers it, or attempts to answer it.

And as we hold those questions, what is church? What's our focus for church? Then we would consider these words from Hebrews, the second reading, where it says, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

[12 : 08] Eyes firmly fixed on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter. The pioneer, the author, the originator. The one who's central to every Old Testament promise.

The one who's the fulfillment of that in the New Testament. The one whose mission is to go out in the community. The one who's the good shepherd who comes into our gathering and says, my sheep, I'm going to tend to your needs.

The one who will eventually lead us home. The one who will take our faith, however small or big our faith is, and he'll enlarge it, he'll perfect it, and he'll make it work out for our good and for his Father's glory.

Jesus, the pioneer and the perfecter of faith. I wonder if this day and going forward as a church, we'll fix our eyes on him.

You know, our communion speaker, a year last June, we've been very blessed with communion speakers, with Ian on the last two occasions. Very, very blessed indeed. And a year last June, we were also blessed with Reverend Norman Affrin from Sandeagle's Parish Church, who came to share God's word with us.

[13 : 21] And this November, Norman will be our speaker again. Norman is a good friend of mine. We've known each other for a number of years. And last weekend, his church, they gathered as a church family.

Over 90 came to their service they had last Saturday in Loch Lomond by Yon Bonny Banks, where they had six believers' baptisms. One of these was a teenager who came to church eight months ago.

He had no church background whatsoever. He did the Alpha course, Introduction Course to Christianity, and he gave his life to Jesus through that course. Then there was a whole household saved.

There was a husband and a wife, again with no church background, except having me brought up going to Mass a few times as youth, and their two young sons, teenage age, child, both gave their lives to Jesus.

And lastly was Norman's wife, Becca. Her granny became a Christian, and she also did the Alpha course throughout lockdown, began to plug in the church, and came to the place where she realized her need of Jesus and confessed him as her Lord and Savior.

[14 : 28] So that was last Saturday for Norman and his church. The next day, they had four individuals, three of whom were baptized the previous day, become members of the church, and professed their faith publicly before the congregation.

And the fourth person who was to do that was Norman's own brother, Paul. And this is what Norman wrote on his Facebook page. Please don't stop praying for your loved ones.

After years and years of praying as a family, we've seen God work an absolute miracle in my brother's life. And it's his story to share. I can't wait for him to share it. But for now, all I'll say is, please, keep praying for your loved ones.

Those who have never known Jesus. Those who have maybe once walked with him a long time ago, but have since fallen away. Pray for them. Pray that they would encounter the redemptive and transformative love of God.

For nothing is impossible for the great God of heaven. I mean, this is wonderful, isn't it? It's truly amazing. And I hope that in hearing that, we're just into the excitement there for November's communion season.

[15 : 32] And so this is leading to point two of the message this morning on Jesus' joy and our joy, and his ambition and our ambition. What is the joy of Jesus as we read in Hebrews?

It's seeing that sort of thing unfold in the hearts of individuals in our churches up in our country. The joy of Jesus is that he paid the price to secure our salvation.

Jesus saw a greater joy as he endured suffering, as he was scorned, as he was mocked and abused. That there was a greater joy that was set before him.

That we would come to know him. And Jesus endured the cross for our sake. He endured it for his own joy. We being his own joy.

And he also endured it for his father's purposes. For his father's greatest purposes. Just as you, if you pick up the book there, the Bible by Andrew Alder. And the greatest purpose that God has from the beginning to end of the Bible is that we would be made right with God.

[16 : 34] That we would be reconciled and know peace with God. Well, this is the wonder and the power of the cross. That Jesus would go through such pain and misery for the joy of seeing us run home to the father.

This is the story of the prodigal son. Where the son has gone his own way and taken his own path. And he's spent his father's money. And he's wasted his life. And he is down with the pigs eating their food.

And he realizes, I need to go home. And as he's about to face the shame of his community. And as they were about to mock him for the way he's disrespected his father. His father runs ahead of that shame.

And he goes to meet his son and to kiss him. And to place on him a new ring. A new robe. And he gives him a seat at the table. This is the heart of the gospel.

And the wonder and the power of the cross. That Jesus' joy, the father's joy for us. To see death defeated. To see shame swallowed up with hope. To see light overcome the darkness.

[17 : 35] To see many come to trust in Jesus. And when it says there, fixing our eyes on Jesus. In the ESV translation it says, looking to Jesus.

And the Greek word there for looking. Means to describe our eyes as a firmly fixed gaze. I wonder, are we looking to Jesus today? I mean, God is at work in churches like Sandy Hills.

God is at work here. And are we looking to Jesus? And together will we encourage the work that God is doing. The ongoing work. That we will be a people who have great joy for the glory of Jesus.

That we would have high and lofty ambitions for what church could be for the Father's fame and glory. We just happened to glance at another church this week. They have a vision month. That's where we had three church in Morishai.

And the minister there, Peter Turnbull. He was saying, we have great ambitions for what church could be. Our desire is that in the next few years we would be a church of three churches.

[18 : 36] Three locations with 100 people in each church. He says, that sounds like a lot in the small villages we're in. But we are the church of Jesus Christ. And we have big ambitions. I wonder that as we continue to fix our eyes, our whole being on Jesus.

And consider him who for the great joy set before him endured suffering for our sake. And who went to the outcast of society. Who came to call sinners such as ourselves. Even as he was rejected for doing so.

That we, because of what he's done for us. Would be a people who ask the Holy Spirit to throw off everything that might hinder us. Every sin that might entangle us. And to fix our eyes.

To have a firmly fixed gaze upon Jesus. So coming to the end of our message now. Part 1 and 2 about Jesus' focus and ours. Jesus' joy and ambition and ours.

And now concluding with Jesus' invitation. His perseverance and ours. And I love the gospel accounts of how Jesus calls the disciples from very ordinary circumstances.

[19 : 38] And he's basically saying, throw off everything and follow me. And they did. They gave up everything to do that. And, well, lest we forget that the disciples, how old were they when Jesus called them?

They were teenagers. And as the former Archbishop of Canterbury, George Carey, once put it, Christianity began as a youth mission. That the disciples were teenagers mainly.

They were learning on the job. And it was all new to them. But how they grew, how they persevered, and how they made such an impact. Especially as Jesus left them. But it all began with an invitation from Jesus to them.

And I love also Hebrews 12. It's one of my favorite passages in the Bible. I love how it speaks about being surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses. That we are cheered on by those who have gone before us.

Just imagining in heaven those who are singing praises, eternal praises to God. But they're also going, go on, go on, go on my son, go on my daughter. I'm cheering you on. And that they, with God, are praying for us.

[20 : 42] We're surrounded by a vast host of people who are now cheering us in the race that we run. And as I read Norman's story earlier, I was reminded of Daniel's prayer. Daniel chapter 9.

Where he was pouring his heart out to God. And he said these words. Now, Lord our God, who brought your people out of Egypt with a mighty hand. And who made for yourself a name that endures to this day.

What's Daniel doing in that prayer? He's looking back to the stories of old. And he's saying, in order to look forward, we need to look back. And that's so key and so vital in our day too.

That we return to the ancient ways of what God has done. And what God has done, he'll do again. And I was also reminded too of the story of Elijah and Elisha.

And do you remember when the great prophet Elijah, he's about to be taken into heaven. And he says to the successor, the younger successor that he's found, Elisha. He says, tell me, what can I do for you before I'm taken from you?

[21 : 42] And Elisha says something to him that didn't best please Elijah. I mean, really, he says something that's a little bit cheeky. He says, Elijah, I want double the blessing that you have in your life.

I want double of your anointing. I want a double portion. I mean, some of us might think, does he think he is? A greedy sword? Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.

I mean, this man Elijah had achieved great things over the years. He'd seen great blessings. And now this man wanted a double portion, even though he'd been with them just a short time. But did I say the greatest thing and the greatest achievement of Elijah's life was to say to Elisha, see what I've got?

You can have it. And you can have double. And so I asked earlier, why do you and I, why do we come to church? What's our focus for this church? What's church all about?

I wonder, are our eyes and our ears and our hearts fixed on Jesus? Or are we concerned with things that can prove to be a distraction? Are we taking a little more focus off Jesus and become concerned with things that, you know what, in the grand scheme of it, it doesn't really matter all that much.

[23 : 01] And what I mean is, are we a little offended of how church might become, of what it is becoming? And you know, as Paul Tripp, a Christian writer, so wisely put it, there's times when I lose sight of what's truly valuable in life.

When I do, it alters what I desire, how I think, what I see, and the things I do. And I'm sure I'm not alone. I know I get distracted.

I get focused on certain things that maybe aren't helpful. And I want to offer a plea this morning that we collectively wouldn't get sidetracked by distractions.

I truly believe that we're in a new era for what church is in our nation. And as I share the testimony of Norman's church, that's the story of many churches up and down our country at the moment.

And I can share also the testimony of another church leader, Reverend Kenny Bartholk, who was speaking at a conference recently. And he said that he believed that there's more signs of life in Scottish churches than he's seen in all his years of ministry over 40 years.

[24 : 10] I believe that the tide has turned for the Christian faith in our country. Maybe we're not seeing it in flesh just yet, but I believe the tide has turned and that we're in a new era.

And if we were to run the race with perseverance, if we were to see the next generation coming through, if we were to see them coming through at all, then our desire would be that they would run well, of course. And who do I mean by the next generation?

Those who are children, young people, and families. If we were to help them, us collectively as a congregation, and that is, I mean, those of us who are really a little bit older, if we were to help them fix their eyes on Jesus, then if we'd gone before them, then the prayer of Daniel for the Lord to make a name for himself, it's so key in that, isn't it?

Remember what's gone before, and let's honor that, and let's establish that, that reference and honor for God and his name. See what that means, see what that looks like, what can that look like in your life.

But also the willingness to be an Elijah, to be willing to give in, to just give in and say, well, anything that I had, see my ceiling, that's going to be your floor.

[25 : 29] And that's a gracious and humble act. And that's the act of someone focused on the Lord. And if we're able to do that here going forward, then I believe the next season for us as a church, I just can't wait to see how God would honor that.

The young and the older, the middle-aged, all ages in between, coming together in beautiful ways, reaching out to our community, enjoying fellowship with one another.

a brand new dawn for this church. Let's not get sidetracked by distractions, and not miss the opportunity. This is the opportunity for us.

This is the answer to the prayers of those who have gone before, and at the time when the church was in vacancy. I just wonder, are we ready to step into this now?

I wonder if, well, I think, a distraction in our day for the church, certainly in the Highlands, is churchy traditionalism. Nothing wrong with traditions, but if they become a distraction, and if our distraction also has been a little bit too reserved in our ambition, and let's not miss this current opportunity with it.

[26 : 44] let's keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, and together as God's people, have vast ambitions for what church could be. Because at the end of the day, what is church?

What's church like? What is the focus of church? What is the mission of church? People have written books, and could your, you know, different thought bubbles.

I believe church is plain and simple. It's about helping one another in the Christian life, get from A to B. That's church. Get from A to B.

About coming in the doors, wherever we're at, traveling light, and being confronted with the reality that we need Jesus. And my hope and prayer is that as we come to church, and as we meet with Jesus, as we gather together, as we sing praises to God, as we hear his word read and proclaimed, as we pray to God, as we take part in the Lord's Supper, as we celebrate people exploring faith, coming to faith, getting baptized, flourishing in their faith, and ultimately encouraging and enjoying one another in the Lord, and serving as part of his mission.

In that, we would see the beauty of what it means to fix our eyes on Jesus, following him as our pioneer, our originator, our author, and our perfecter of faith, our kid.

[28 : 05] And as we do that, we would love one another, and that people would look on the outside and say, see, see how they love each other, see how they love this community, see how they love people of all ages, from all walks of life.

And that we would hear this invite of Jesus and not miss this opportunity, but grasp it and go together and say, yes, Lord Jesus, have your way on us.

Let's pray together. Amen. Father God, we thank you for your words spoken to us.

And we pray very simply, help us to live our days to the full, being true to you in every way. Jesus, help us to give ourselves away to others, being kind to everyone we meet.

Spirit, help us to love the lost, proclaiming Christ in all we do and see. Amen.