

Sunday 22nd January 2017, Epiphany 3. Canongate Kirk.

Isaiah 9:1 *In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

These last few days the parish has been all astir. Returned to what the prophet calls “the former time”. If you timed it right you might have thought you were back in the eighteenth century, among men and women dressed for the part and horses and carriages just like those that must have once graced the Canongate. And if you listened carefully you might have heard the click of a clapperboard and a director shout “Action”, as in a great array of caravans and wagons Hollywood came to Holyrood and Outlander came in, into the city and into the parish and onto our doorstep literally, right across the street in fact with filming taking place in Bakehouse Close. For those of you who haven’t heard of it, and until recently that was probably most of us, Outlander is a popular American television series now on its third season, but here according to the internet, is how the first season began.

In 1945, former World War II nurse Claire Randall and her husband Frank are visiting Inverness. She returns on her own to a set of standing stones and suddenly finds herself in the middle of a skirmish between Redcoats and rebel Scottish Highlanders. She is attacked by Frank's double, Redcoat Captain Jonathan "Black Jack" Randall, but rescued by some Scottish Gaels. She is able to use her medical knowledge to help one of them, Jamie Fraser. Claire realises she has somehow travelled back in time to the 18th century. She wants to go back to the stones and try to return to the 20th century, but is held at a castle as healer to the clan. Claire comes to understand that the Gaels are covertly collecting funds for the Jacobite army. Knowing from history that their cause is doomed to fail, Claire tries to warn them. Jamie marries Claire to protect her from the sadistic Randall, but Claire also feels guilty about Frank, who in 1945 is losing hope of finding her. When she finally revisits the stones, they hear each other calling through time, but she is then captured by English troops, and taken to Fort William. And so it goes on with Claire and Jamie eventually finding themselves in France in the hope of meeting Bonnie Prince Charlie and somehow changing history to prevent the Battle of Culloden.

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. Isaiah too reflects on a former time scarred by feuding and bloodshed, with today’s reading stopping short of the verse that says “For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.” But as our Bible Study group has already discovered Isaiah’s great prophecies revolve around promises of salvation expressed in visions that see swords turned into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks, some of them yet to be realised, others finding fulfilment in the birth of Jesus. The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them has light shined. *In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.*

If the main feature of a programme like Outlander is an ability to travel back in time then by happy coincidence the Bible readings set for today allow us to travel both forward and back in time, to look ahead and back from one reading to another. Turning from Isaiah’s prophecy to St Matthew’s Gospel we suddenly find ourselves not in the former time but in the latter

time after all, and in the latter place, Galilee of the nations, taking the way of the sea so that what had been spoken by the prophet Isaiah, as St Matthew puts it, might be fulfilled. And there as Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, we were reminded of how he called the first disciples, Peter and Andrew, James and John, to leave their nets and their boats, their families and their friends, their homes and everything that was familiar to them, to leave it all behind and follow him. Will you come and follow me, we sang at the earlier service,

*Will you come and follow me
if I but call your name?
Will you go where you don't know
and never be the same?*

With the benefit of hindsight of course we know exactly where their reckless following would lead the disciples, to the courtyard of Caiaphas and to the cross of Calvary. And it's to the foot of the cross that our Epistle reading this morning enables us to travel back in time. "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel", writes St Paul to the Corinthians, "and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power. For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God". How readily might a well-meaning time-traveller want to go back to that very moment and that very place and try to prevent it, to go back to the moment when everything seemed to be going wrong, when everything and everybody was falling apart and turn it all around and change the course of history? For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. And thus saved by that power, would we change a single thing?

*We have a gospel to proclaim,
Good news for all throughout the earth;
The gospel of a Saviour's name:
We sing his glory, tell his worth.*

In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. And now may God bless to us this preaching of his most holy word, and to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all praise and glory now and forever. Amen.