

We are called to Worship

Welcome

Good morning and welcome to worship here in Portstewart Presbyterian Church. If you are visiting with us, we hope you have already been made to feel welcome and that each of us know God's blessing and presence as we worship together. Every week we welcome visitors, but I also want to take time this morning to say welcome to the members who are here pretty much every week. You are appreciated and valued, and it is not only our prayer on Sunday mornings that each of us know God's presence and blessing, but it something we pray for one another throughout the week. It is good that we are church together, both local and visitor, faithful members who are here every week and those who for whatever reason dip in and out... together we are the church of Jesus Christ, worshipping Jesus, serving Jesus and proclaiming Jesus.

It's wonderful to have Hannah Pollocks family and friends with us today as her Mum and Dad, Rachel and Jason present her for baptism this morning.

Announcements

I have a couple of thanks to make this morning. Thank you to GB not only for a fun display on Friday night but for a year of hard work. Thank you also to the events committee who organised yet another successful event as the Sperrin Choir sang here in the church last night.

Reminder to our young people that there is no **Established** tonight, instead you are going to **EXPLORE** in New Row. If you haven't yet booked your place, please speak to Michelle today. There are still places available.

Call to Worship

This morning, we are continuing our Lent Series on the I am sayings, today it is I am the gate. If we hear nothing else this morning, then please hear and understand this. The only reason we have church this morning, the whole point of our church, the reason we are here, the reason we do what we do throughout the week is to point people to Jesus because only Jesus can bring us the hope, peace and indeed the salvation that we so desperately need and long for.

The psalmist tells us: ***Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.*** (Psalm 37:3-4)

There have been a number of Sunday's recently when I have been sitting with you in the body of the church and I have to say the singing sounds much better where you are, I struggle to hear us sing from up here. So this morning we are going to fix that! As we take delight in God and as an expression of our trust in God lets sing out, lets sing at a level and with a passion like never before. Let's worship God as we stand to sing (If we are able) **rejoice the Lord is king and I will enter his courts with thanksgiving in my heart.**

Opening Praise

IPH 454 Rejoice, the Lord is king
I will enter his courts with thanksgiving

Opening Prayer

Living God, we would offer this day of worship, but we are so easily led astray, our minds preoccupied with other concerns, our attention caught by trivia, our sense of expectation eroded by familiarity.

We would offer our lives in service, but it is a similar story, our faith so often suffocated by the cares of each day, our discipleship put second to what can never truly satisfy, our relationship with you taken for granted and allowed to stagnate.

Through this time together, end this season, call us back to you. Remind us of essentials, challenge us concerning our priorities and restore us to your side, so that when temptation comes, we will stay as true to you as you are true to us.

Living God, cleanse us of all that is unworthy of you, all that calls us away from you, rid us of all that is false, redeem us from all that is wrong. Grant us a pure heart and a right spirit, by the grace of Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

Gracious God, teach us to celebrate and savour every moment of every day with heartfelt praise and joyful thanksgiving by teaching us to keep Jesus at the heart of every moment and every day. This we pray in Jesus' name, amen.

We hear from God's Word

Reading

John 10: 1-10

Gordon Wileman

Very truly I tell you Pharisees, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. ²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. ⁵But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognise a stranger's voice.' ⁶Jesus used this figure of speech, but the Pharisees did not understand what he was telling them.

⁷Therefore Jesus said again, 'Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. ⁹I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.^[a] They will come in and go out, and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

Praise

IPH 171 How lovely is your dwelling place

Sermon

I am the gate for the sheep.

Most of us here this morning, or at least most of us of a certain age, will remember what it is to come to church and it to be almost full. I remember going to Sunday School in **Antrim Methodist Church** and the hall being filled with tables as classes for every age teamed with life and there was what seemed to be a ready supply of teachers.

I, like others I'm sure, feel sorry for our children and young people because they have not experienced being part of something bigger, something where they are surrounded by all of their friends.

We look at how things have changed, and our first instinct is to long for what used to be. Certainly, here in Portstewart people have talked to me about the days when chairs had to be set out in the aisles.

Our second instinct is to try and fix the problem. We look at some of the changes that have been made over the years and so we decide that the decline is because of that. We want things to go back to the way they were, because obviously that was what worked and what we have today is not working.

All of this is born out of our love for the church. We want to see the church prosper, we want to see people coming to the church, we want to see the church setting some of the values in society again. There is no malice in us, it's not that we are stuck in the past, we just long to see the church thrive in the way we imagine it did when we were younger.

This isn't something just for the more traditional folks amongst us. Those among us who seek to drive change, who want to modernise the church this is driven by the same motives. We look at the church and we see her struggling, we long to see her thrive, we want to reach an ever-changing world and make the church relevant in that world, so that the church will grow.

It doesn't matter if we are looking back seeking to become more traditional, or seeking to regain some lost values, or if we are looking forward wanting to drive change because the traditions aren't working today – in both cases our motives are the same, we love the church.

This is the same mindset the Pharisees had when Jesus said to them, ***I am the gate for the sheep.*** (John 10:7)

The Pharisees loved what we would call the church. They loved that collective act of worship when the people came together. They loved the scriptures, the way of life that came from being immersed in the scriptures, the rituals and traditions. They could see how all of this had served the people well in the past and they wanted to protect it for future generations.

We sometimes paint the Pharisees in a bad light, we think of them as unloving and uncaring, unsympathetic to the daily struggles of ordinary life. Certainly, their cause is not helped when we read the stories such as the **man born blind**, when they seemed to treat this poor man harshly and unkindly because of his trust in Jesus. It was this story that caused Jesus to say ***I am the gate for the sheep.***

We have to remember that what they were trying to do was protect a way of life, protect their church – in exactly the same way that we do today. We can raise all kinds of questions about how they went about it, and indeed how we go about it. This is what they were doing. When they saw Jesus' healing on a Sabbath, when they saw people chasing after Jesus instead of listening to the rabbis and chief rabbis, when they heard Jesus with a new interpretation of the law, when they and their way of life was being criticised – they saw all of this as an attack on their church. This was the cause of all the friction.

When Jesus said ***I am the gate for the sheep***, he was saying to the Pharisees and to us that he understood their love for the church, our love for the church. He understood their desire and ours that the church would grow and prosper, that new people would come along, that families who haven't been in a while would come back. Jesus gets that, he understands that, but the way to bring people into the church, into the kingdom, into the faith is not by focusing on the church, but on Jesus.

It doesn't matter if we had of been one of the Pharisees in Judea, or If we are traditionalists today fighting for how things used to be or modernisers wanting to drive change to become more relevant – if our focus is only on the church, then we are in trouble because what we are actually doing is turning the church into an idol, we are setting the church up in place of God. This is what the Pharisees had done, and I believe this is what we do today.

Let me ask a question. Why do we do the things we do? Why do we have youth clubs and youth fellowships, why is so much effort put into the schools, or the work with asylum seekers, why do we work so hard at PW, why do we put our services online, have bible studies and prayer times? What is the honest answer to that question... is it so as more people will come to church?

This may well be a noble and good desire, but if this is the goal of all our activity then what we have done is turned the church into the gate. We have said the way to give people hope, the way of salvation even is the church. We have said church activity, church things will fill the longing in our hearts and in our lives, that church will ultimately deal with our sinfulness.

Jesus said, ***I am the gate for the sheep.*** The purpose of the church... and don't get me wrong I think the church is incredibly important, I, like so many of us here today, have an incredibly high view of the church... but the purpose of the church is to point to Christ, to Jesus, because he alone is the only one who can fill us with hope, only he can deal with our sinfulness, only he can offer salvation.

I am friendly with a respected former moderator of our church. (I'm not going to mention his name) He would talk to me about people being good church men or church women. They are loyal to the church, they love the church, they serve the church, and he would talk about how the church needs people like this. In many ways he is right, but Jesus goes one step further. Jesus tells us that good church folk might be necessary to do the things the church is called to do, to serve, to help, to reach out, but without Jesus at the heart, without a desire for people to come to faith in Jesus Christ in a transformational way, a life changing way, then all of the activity in the world won't have the impact we long for, the church will never grow in the way we hope.

Actually, if the goal is only ever to protect the church then Jesus was saying that rather than protecting the church what we are actually doing is robbing and stealing from the church, instead of bringing life to the church we are actually killing it... ***anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber.*** (John 10:1)

When our goal is the church, we are robbing people of something incredibly important. Jesus. Jesus is the gate; Jesus is the one we must bring people to if we want them to become part of the church. Everything we do is about pointing people to Jesus.

Where has our focus been? Has it all been about the church and not Jesus? Have we only ever experienced the church and never Jesus? Have we only ever talked about the church and not Jesus?

This morning, we are being invited to come through the gate, through Jesus. To confess our hope is only in him, to give ourselves only to him, to point people only to him, because it is when we come to Jesus that we see what the church is really like, the power to change, the people being added to its number, but we have to come to Jesus, it has to be about Jesus.

We respond to God's word

Praise

IPH 93 Lord I come before your throne...

Baptism Hanna Pollock

Explanation Baptism

God is a God of communities and families. In the very beginning God created Adam and Eve because it was not good for a man to be alone. When human sinfulness reached such a level that God decided he would flood the earth we are told that Noah found favour with the Lord. (Genesis 6:8) and yet it wasn't just Noah who was saved, his family found refuge in the Ark with him.

When God made promises to Abraham, those promises were inherited by the family he had with Sarah, and they continued through the generations. In the New Testament we read of the Philippian jailor coming to faith and he was baptised, along with his family and his household. The apostle Peter tells us that salvation is not just for us, but for our families and our children as well.

The church is not a collection of individuals who just happen to have something in common, the church is a community, a family of believers who have been called together by God.

Each time God makes a promise he seals that promise with a sign. That means he puts his official stamp on the promise so we can know it is real and genuine; it can be trusted. The promise given to Noah and his family was sealed with sign of the rainbow, the promise given to Abraham and his family was sealed with sign of circumcision, the promise of salvation is sealed with the sign of baptism.

Because God is a God of the family; a God who calls us to be his people, his community so it is only members of that community who inherit the sign. This is why in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland we only baptise the children of believing parents who are able to demonstrate a credible profession of faith of in Jesus Christ, a faith that is confessed through the vows they make to and before God.

This however is not an exclusive community that is only open to those who were born into it. Adults, who come to saving faith in Jesus Christ, are welcomed into this community on profession of their own faith and they to receive the sign and seal of baptism.

Just as everyone who sees a rainbow is not necessarily a believer, nor is every circumcised Jew living in accordance to the law, neither is every baptised child automatically a Christian. Everyone who sees a rainbow can know that God has promised never to flood the earth again and so they are reminded that God is merciful and should be trusted. Every Jew who is circumcised is reminded that God has entered into a covenantal relationship with them and if they are faithful to that covenant they will receive God's blessing, and every baptised child is reminded that God has promised salvation to all who believe in Jesus Christ and so they are called to trust in him.

Baptism points us to Jesus that we might trust him, and then it reminds us that our trust in Christ is secure. Each time we are reminded of our baptism, usually on days like today when we are part of this moment in the life of another family we are told again of the faithfulness of God and the security we have in Christ, we are called again to trust him with our lives.

It is because God's promises are secure and his seal is trustworthy that baptism is administered only once and always in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – that perfect expression of Godly community.

Baptism (Including Aaronic Blessing)

Response of Faith

Would the congregation please stand, and Jason, Rachel, Alice and Hannah please come forward?

Jason and **Rachel** because you bring **Hannah** to be baptised, I now ask you to confess your faith in Jesus Christ.

1. Are you affirming your belief in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit? (I am)
2. Are you trusting in Jesus Christ alone, as your Saviour from sin and as Lord of your life? (I am)
3. Depending on the grace of God:
 - a. Are you committed to living as a follower of Jesus Christ, led and empowered by the Holy Spirit? (I am)
 - b. Are you willing to provide a Christian home, and bring up your child in the worship and teaching of the church, so that he/she may come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour? (I am)

Commitment by the congregation:

Because baptism is personal but never private, we the congregation have a role to play in **Hannah's** life, therefore

As we receive (**Hannah**) into the fellowship of the Church, do you promise with God's help, to be faithful in prayer, spiritual nurture, Christian example and influence, for **Hannah** and **Her** family?
(We do)

Prayers

We thank you, O God, for our baptism into Christ's death and resurrection. In the beginning your Spirit moved over the waters... In the time of Noah, you destroyed evil in the water of the flood, and by your saving ark you gave a new beginning. In the night of trouble, you led Israel through the sea... In the water of Jordan our Lord was baptised... In the baptism of Christ's death and resurrection, you have set us free from sin and death and opened the way to eternal life.

May Christ, who sank deep into death and was raised Lord of life, keep us and our little ones in the grip of his hand. May your Spirit separate us from sin and mark us with a faith that can stand the light of day and endure the dark of night. To you be all honour and glory, dominion and power, now and forever, through Jesus Christ our Lord, amen.

Baptism

Hannah Alexandra Pollock, I baptise you in the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen. The blessing of God, Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be upon you and abide in you forever. Amen

Declaration

Hannah is now received, according to Christ's command, into the membership of the Holy universal and apostolic Church and is promised to be the Lord's.

Aaronic Blessing

Words of welcome

Brothers and sisters, we now receive **Hannah** into Christ's church. I charge you to nurture and love **her** and to assist **her** to be Christ's faithful disciple. **Prayer...**

Almighty and eternal God, we thank you that in your infinite mercy and goodness you have promised to be not only our God but also the God and Father of our children and that you have received **Hannah** by baptism into the life of your church.

Guard and guide **Hannah** all **her** days. May your love hold **her**, your truth be his guide, and your joy delight **her**. May **she** grow strong in body and mind and come to faith in Jesus as Lord and Saviour. Make **her** home a place of safety and security and help **her** parents to teach **her** your truth and lead **her** in your way.

We pray for all families in this congregation. May you be cherished in all our homes, may your presence in our midst transform our lives, and may all our children grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus. In his name, we pray, AMEN.

Present Hannah with a bible.

We are Sent Out to Serve in God's World

Praise

One more step along the world I go.

Charge to the People

Acts 16: 31

Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.

Benediction