

Leaflet



Greenbank Parish Church
Braidburn Terrace, EH10 6ES
No 620 October 2012

Minister's Letter

Pulpit Diary

Oct 7
9.30am First Sunday Service led by Kirk Session
10.30am Morning Worship with Dedication of Guild

Oct 14
10.30am Morning Worship
(Special activity for children)

Oct 21
10.30am Morning Worship

Oct 28
10.30am Morning Worship

Nov 4
9.30am First Sunday Service led by Guild
10.30am Morning Worship

For information about church organisations, please contact the Church Office (Mon–Fri, 9.00am–12.00pm, 1.30pm–3.30pm):
Mrs Virginia Johnston
tel and fax: 0131 447 9969
e-mail: greenbankchurch@btconnect.com
The pastoral team can be contacted through the Church Office:
Rev Alison Swindells
tel and fax: 0131 447 4032
email: alisonswindells@blueyonder.co.uk
Rev W. Peter Graham
tel: 0131 445 5763

To make contact with any of the organisations described in this Leaflet, please use the telephone number given, if there is one; otherwise contact the Church Office.

Dear Friends

“Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never hurt me”. I’m sure that you will all be familiar with those words. I’m equally sure that you will know that they are simply not true. Words are capable of inflicting just as much, if not more damage than a physical blow – ask any child who has been the victim of playground bullying.



Recently the Independent Panel looking into the Hillsborough Disaster, which resulted in the deaths of 96 Liverpool football fans, published their findings. That so many should die in such a manner is a tragedy in itself. So too are the shocking revelations of police cover-ups and failures on the part of the ambulance service. But perhaps the greatest tragedy of all has been the confirmation of attempts on the part of the police to blacken the reputations of those who died. For years the grief of the victims’ relatives has been augmented by the pain of the unsubstantiated accusations of drunkenness and violence hurled at their loved ones. Over the last few weeks in our morning services we have been focussing on the letter of James. Perhaps the most familiar passage from that letter is the one that warns of the power of the tongue and its capacity to wreak havoc.

“How great a fire is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire”.

And surely that is so clearly demonstrated in the Hillsborough story – the fire begun by one denial of responsibility, one refusal to apologise, has raged for 23 years. It has scorched the truth of many witness statements and fuelled the circulation of much misinformation.

Throughout this time relatives in a quest for truth and justice have sought to clear the

names of their loved ones. That search is likely to continue as we see requests for new inquests and criminal proceedings. But we must wonder if justice can ever be done now? With stricter controls on alcohol and crowd behaviour and better stadium seating, it is easy to overlook other questions such as, “Why did there have to be cages at

the football ground in the first place?” Or why were there so many ambulances outside the ground? Or why did the police feel they had to open the gates to fans after the match had started?” 23 years on and many have forgotten the battlefield mentality which pervaded football matches like these. Of course none of this can justify a deliberate attempt to blacken the reputations of those who died. But a different culture and ethos can present their own challenge to the quest for truth and justice. That fire begun with a few words 23 years ago is unlikely to be easily extinguished.

But if the tongue has the capacity to do great damage, words also have the potential to bring about great blessing. Through words we can communicate our feelings and our concern for others. The right words can open the way to healing and comfort where there is pain and loss. Words spoken from the heart can help to mend and restore broken relationships.

And of course the greatest blessing of all is to be found in God’s Word made flesh in Jesus Christ. And that Word is a word of love for the world. The Gospel story is one of grace, forgiveness and hope. Pray that our words may reflect that same grace, forgiveness and hope that God has shown to us!

With warmest wishes

Alison I Swindells
Minister

Thank You from Charlotte

In a letter received recently from Mrs Charlotte McCaulay, she expressed her thanks for the leaving gift presented to her by the congregation. She has used part of it to buy four new hens and will use the rest for garden furniture. Unfortunately, the move to Canterbury did not go as smoothly as planned and the house has had rather a lot of maintenance issues. However, they are slowly being sorted and they hope to have cold water in the bathroom in a few weeks!! She misses Greenbank dreadfully but would like to thank the congregation not only for the gift but for all the support she received during her time with us.

Resignation of Elders

Ray Dely and Colin Winchester have both intimated their desire to resign from the Kirk Session. These were approved with regret at the June and September meetings, respectively.

Ray was ordained to the eldership at Falkirk Old Parish in 1978 and admitted to the Greenbank Session in 1993. He has served the Session as convener of the Adult Education Committee and of the Welcome Committee as well as on the Board and the Communications Committee. He also represented the Kirk Session as Presbytery Elder and his entertaining and sometimes highly amusing reports of Presbytery activities were greatly appreciated by fellow elders. He has taken good care of the members of District 69B for many years and recently received a well-deserved long service certificate.

Colin was ordained to the eldership at Cramond Kirk in 1998 and admitted to the Greenbank Session in 2009. He has served the Session as a member of the Board and has taken care of the members of District 63 since November 2010.

We are sorry to lose the support of these faithful elders but are very grateful for their contributions to the work of the Session and of their service to the congregation.

Overseas Missionary Fellowship

News of Catherine Ambler (now Cathy Hunt).

Some of you may remember my daughter, Catherine Ambler, who attended Sunday School and Qll at Greenbank and became a member of the church here in her teens before doing a year out with Scripture Union before university.



Now married with two girls aged 5 and 3, she and her husband, Ali Hunt, have been accepted as candidates to work with Overseas Missionary Fellowship (OMF) in Cambodia. OMF was founded in 1865 by Hudson Taylor as China Inland Mission and now works in 10 countries on the Asia Pacific Rim.

They had been thinking and praying about working overseas for a number of years and will leave Edinburgh on October 28th 2012. There will be an Orientation Course in Singapore for 3 weeks prior to travelling on to Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia.

For the first 3 months they will do full time language study and then go on to be involved primarily in healthcare/ development work. Ali is a Podiatrist and will be working with lepers, and Cathy is an Occupational Therapist and will be able to use her skills with people with amputations (one in three hundred have amputations as a result of landmine injuries). Please get in touch with me if you would like more information, or if you would like to support them in any way.

Alison Ambler

Socks and Gloves

Winter is still a little way off (hopefully!) but our Help the Homeless team are already thinking about the Bethany Night Shelters over the cold months.

New/nearly new socks and gloves are always greatly appreciated by the homeless. The Greenbank congregation has continued to give generously of these so once again I am putting out an appeal to you all. Thank you to people who have continued to donate over the summer months. We can never have too many.

Please put items in the food box at the front door of the church.

Pauline Walker

Business Brains

Urgently Required Volunteers

Retired or newly retired men and women with a business background are needed to serve on the Board of the Open Door, possibly only in an advisory capacity. Please help us to keep the Door open and thereby support the community.

For further information email:
theopendoor@morningside.org.uk

The National Youth Assembly 2012

Even though I'd never been before, I could sense that the NYA was going to be something of a special weekend - not only for being something I have long craved (debating current issues with diverse peers while bringing a Christian perspective into play, no matter our individual strength of conviction), but also on something of a personal level too. I am pleased to say it did not disappoint! Despite some initial nerves, I managed to settle into the non-stop rhythm of the weekend, meeting some amazing people and making new friends along the way. During the weekend we learned a number of short songs which we would strike up on occasion, - my favourite was 'Bambelela' ('Never give up' - appropriate given the theme for the

weekend was 'Breaking Barriers') which I'd happily pass on but as I only learned the bass part I might need some help!

Throughout the weekend we'd been spending time in our 'small groups' - this was part of the setup for the debate, as well as being a good way to get to know people, and was probably one of the best organisational ideas I've seen in regards to a debate, allowing for those who perhaps aren't as comfortable speaking in front of the whole assembly still to have their voice heard prior to the main debate. As such, I hope to see this emulated elsewhere. As for the events outwith the main debates, I felt overwhelmed by the choice of the workshops and didn't want to have to choose only one of them to go to (what a nice problem to have!).

After all the day's workshops, debating and worship was over there were a number of further options for those who were still looking to squeeze more out of the day - these included another opportunity for worship through music with a young Christian artist, engaging discussions on some slightly taboo topics, a round-up of the day's events with a general time of contemplation, and two films exploring further barriers people face. I chose to go to the discussions, titled 'The Great Divide'. These covered some of the topics often conveniently overlooked or sidelined when talking with youths, so to have such an open dialogue on them was quite liberating to see. One of these topics was gender, and since this seemed to feature rather a lot during the weekend as a

barrier faced not only by The Church of Scotland but also by wider society, it could not have been more apt a choice. Various stereotypes on both sides were listed and recanted in quick succession with everyone seeming to be in informed agreement by the end - even if it took till after 2am to get there!

One of the things I particularly like about the NYA is that they are working with the SYP (Scottish Youth Parliament) and, accordingly, all the deliverances (resolutions/proposals) that are put through from the debates will end up being put in the Blue Book which is then debated by the General Assembly. Not only are we able to have some say in matters of the church, but we are also setting the example by working in collaboration with the SYP as this is not quite the case with our more esteemed counterparts in the form of the GA and the Scottish Parliament. Ultimately, if you think that we youths have no say in such important matters, I beg to differ - the NYA is our voice, YOUR voice, and it is being heard loud and clear.

On the whole, despite not listening to the advice of not staying up late three nights in a row (I didn't want to miss a thing), I was just too wired from the past few days and too uplifted by personal revelation to care: I can honestly say I have never had such an exhilarating, liberating and rejuvenating experience and pray that next year's NYA brings the same sense of community and love as it did this year.

Alastair Ross

Friendship Club

The first meeting is at 2.30pm on Wednesday 3rd October when we'll give members, new members, and our speaker Scot Mofat a very warm welcome. He has had a very varied and high-flying career in Education, and is going to let us into the secret of 'The man who put Scot into Scotland'. There will be no accident about Kathleen Patrick's choice of music for her afternoon of 'Serendipity' on 10th October This will be followed on 17th October by a talk, illustrated with delightful old film, entitled 'Fred with or without Ginger' given by Dr Peter Kendrick. We'll expect a bit of toe tapping. Our last meeting in October on the 31st is about coping with deafness - a subject, I suspect, quite close to our members' hearts. The Rev Sarah Kilby has been Chaplain to the Bishop of Edinburgh (for people who are hard of hearing) and being deaf herself is well qualified to talk to us on 'The Sounds of Silence'.

Come and join us as we embark on Greenbank's version of U3A.

Val Smart

World Mission

One World Stall

The next One World Stall will be on Sunday 14th October - we will have for sale a selection of Fair Trade goods.

Advance Notice

Nora Carmi who was a senior member of Sabeel, the Palestinian Theological College in Jerusalem, is visiting Edinburgh on 4th November and will speak at the Evening Service in Morningside Parish Church on that date. Nora had a pivotal position in many of the programmes of Sabeel and its links to the wider Christian community.

John Ritchie

BAGs of Fun?

Watch out for details of the BAGs Wine and Cheese Tasting on October 25th at 8 pm.



Book Review

"...a sort of miracle"

The 200 year journey of the Canonmills Family

Hamish Coghill

ISBN 978-0-9566956-1-1

Canonmills Press £4.99

This book was of immediate interest to me because of the role several members of the Canonmills family play in the life of the congregation of Greenbank and in the charity Scottish Love in Action. I wished to know more about that congregation where I know a number of the members. It may be a small congregation but they have a strong Christian witness.

Hamish Coghill tells the story of the congregation's remarkable journey from the founding of the Dublin Street Baptist Church through the development of its ministry over the years then the move in 1998 to Canonmills to become Canonmills Baptist Church followed by the further development on that site.

Through reading this brief history you come to realise that life and ministry for this small congregation has often been a challenge. They have not always had a pastor to lead them and expensive property repairs have often loomed large in the life of the congregation. The congregation persevered to keep their family together by worshipping and witnessing and their story is inspirational.

Canonmills now operates under a corporate ministry which was developed by Tom Fleming, Kenny McRae and Hamish Coghill – the "three musketeers". They encourage visiting preachers. The late Tom Fleming, who was for many years their leader, expressed the belief that they are Christ's family in Canonmills. In the last piece he wrote for the congregation he reminded them that "The Communion Table is not OURS, the church itself is not OURS. Always Jesus at the centre. We are Christ's family".

They have a policy of open membership, open communion and family meals eaten together.

I would recommend this small volume to anyone who is interested in the story of the Baptist church in Edinburgh and the Canonmills area.

John D Ritchie

Bookstall

The next Bookstall date is 9th December. If you would like to order a copy of *"...a sort of miracle"* or any other books please contact us.

John and Joan Ritchie

The 'Good Book' Group

-Dear God, I know it says turn the other cheek, but what happens if your sister hits you on the eye? love Teresa Age 7

-Dear God,

If it is in the Bible it is true isn't it? Like on the encyclopaedia? John Age 9

-Dear God

In Bible times did they really talk that fancy? Norma Age 8

-Dear God

Are you real? Some people don't believe it. If you are, you better do something quick

Harriet Ann Age 10

Do the questions of those children resonate with you? Do you find reading the Bible a struggle? Would you like to find out more about the contents of the 'Good Book' but have always been afraid to ask? Would you like to meet with others who also have lots of questions? Then this Book Group is for you. We will be meeting (usually in the Manse, 112 Greenbank Crescent) for an hour or so, once a fortnight on a Wednesday evening at 8.00pm over coffee and cake.

Contact Alison Swindells Tel 447 4032 or Helen Barnes Tel 447 2603 for further details.

Changes to our Church Calendar in November

I would like to take this opportunity to draw your attention in advance to two changes in our normal pattern in November.

The first is that there will be no Time to Remember on the first Sunday in November. This short afternoon time of words and music has run for many years and provided a helpful space for many in our

community. We are very grateful to the Bereavement Team who have organised this in the past and we are currently looking at other ways of ministering to the needs of the bereaved. One option may be to include a quieter service in our 2013 Christmas Schedule. This is a time of year which many of those who have lost someone close to them find particularly difficult. If you have any thoughts on this I would be delighted to hear from you - please give me a call.

The second change is to the starting time and format of our service on Remembrance Sunday, 11th November. I know that some of you have been concerned that up until now our children and young people have not been present in Church for the Act of Remembrance. After some discussion the Session agreed to delay the start of morning worship on Remembrance Sunday to 10.50am and to begin the service with the Act of Remembrance. With the exception of Spectrum 1, which will begin in the Upper Hall at 10.45am, the children will remain in Church with their parents until after the Act of Remembrance before leaving for their Spectrum groups.

Alison I Swindells

The Guild



Well here we are ready to begin our new session on Tuesday 2nd October when John and Joan Ritchie and Gillian Sweetman will be telling us about their recent visit to Israel and their study of the position of the Palestinians in what seems to be an insoluble conflict.

On 16th October we are going to hear about life at "Life and Work" from Jackie Macadam and on 30th October the Neighbouring Guilds meeting is at Morningside Parish at 2.30pm.

We do hope that more of you will come and join us and do remember that all our meetings are open to all our friends so if you see a topic which particularly interests you do come along.

The Guild meets on the first and third Tuesdays of the month at 7.30pm in the Braid Room and a warm welcome awaits you.

Ann Pirie

Charity Christmas Card and Gift Sale

The annual Charity Christmas Card and Gift Sale will take place this year on Saturday 3rd November from 10.00 am to 2.00 pm in the church halls.

Last year 22 different charities participated. Already several of these have booked their place for November so it is anticipated that a wide variety of charity Christmas cards and gifts will be on sale.

As usual morning coffees and soup lunches will be served.

Please put this date in your diaries and come and support this worthwhile event.

Mairi Stevenson

Comiston Probus Club

If you are a male ex-PROfessional BUSInessman, including teachers and academics, you may like to consider joining our club. We meet once a month on the morning of the first Wednesday of the month from February to November, with a "Ladies Lunch" in December (our session starts in September) in Mortonhall Golf Club for coffee, biscuits and chat before a talk. Our talks have varied widely in content, examples being Deserts of Egypt, Burma, Barber Shop Choirs, the Magic of the French Horn, to Dynamic Earth and many more. If you would like to know more, please speak to Malcolm Watters 445 1949, Alasdair Smart 447 6001, or Jim Craig 447 4595.

Please note that members have no additional outside commitments.

Church Library

Over the Summer the Adult Section of our Church library has been relocated to the Pentland Room. We are grateful to all who have helped with the relocation, and to the Congregational Board for a grant which has enabled us to purchase some new books. These include the new Tom Wright 'For Everyone' series of commentaries which are helpfully broken down into passages for daily reading. Meanwhile some new books with worship suggestions should be helpful for those who are leading 9.30 services and devotions for groups

or organisations. These are all available for you to borrow for short periods – please record your loan in the book that is available in the library. You are of course welcome to come in and browse!

Morningside Heritage Association:

Session 2012-13

Thursday 4th October 2012 at 7.00 p.m.

Venue : The Old Schoolhouse, 140 Morningside Road

The Charles Smith Lecture

The 2012-13 session opens with an illustrated talk on the Colinton Public Art Project. The Project, which includes art, poetry and sculpture, is a celebration of Colinton's 900-year history, including Robert Louis Stevenson's close associations as a child.

All are welcome to join us.

Fresh Start

Fresh Start's training initiative is continuing to provide training and employment opportunities for people who have been homeless. Often, people who have been homeless struggle to make the transition to employment, and the programme allows trainees to develop and grow, access training, and gain experience in a work environment that is interesting and allows them to use practical skills.

Next Fresh Start collections are on 28th October and 25th November in the hall after the morning service. See list for suitable items to donate – in good condition, please. (You can find the list on the notice board by the church office)

Pick up a leaflet from me, see www.fresh-startweb.org.uk or phone 476 7741, to find out more about Fresh Start.

Alison Ambler

Christian Aid

COFFEE MORNING

will be held in

Morningside Parish Church Halls

on

Saturday 27th October 2012
10am-12noon

Home Baking & Preserves,
Books, CDs, DVDs & Jigsaws.

Christmas Cards

Traidcraft.

Various Craft Stalls

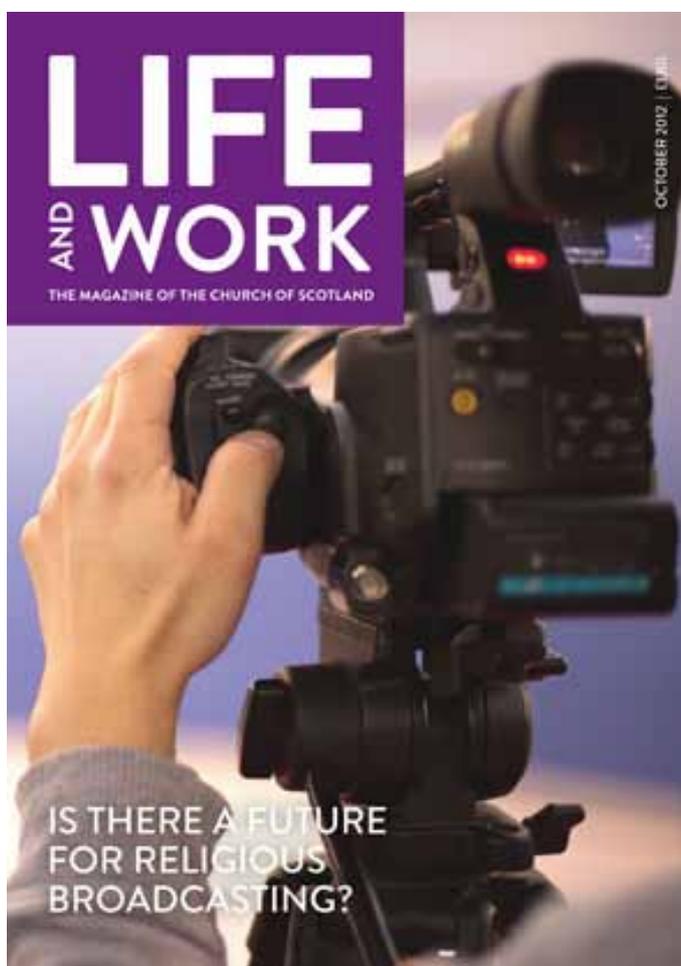
Plant Stall: includes Spring Flowering
Primroses



Refreshments- £2.50
Juice 50p



Donations of Home Baking, Preserves, Plants,
Books etc, will be gratefully received in the hall.



Youth Programme

We're now a month into the school term and for many the summer holidays seem like a distant memory. But while a return to homework may not be something to celebrate, the return of our youth programmes certainly is!

The young people in our S1-3 Springboard class had a fantastic afternoon at Laserquest and are looking forward to their next outing. Hopefully it will be one at which the adults are not so easily defeated!

A youth club for S1-3s has also begun. It's called 321 and will meet twice a month for an evening of fun and games. At our inaugural meeting we split into teams and made Mario Kart inspired go-karts out of cardboard boxes and various recyclables which we raced around the church halls. And at our most recent meeting we spent the evening making BAFTA quality music videos. We are always happy to welcome new people, so if you're in S1-3 and are interested, please come along!

For those a bit older, QII has also started back up and we are very happy to welcome Toby Tucker and Fizz Wann to our leadership team. Our S4-6 students meet every Sunday evening for a variety of activities. We're looking forward to game nights, a safari supper, a weekend away, and discussions about current events and social justice issues.

Also on Sunday nights, once a month, we have Worship With Young People (WWYP), where we use music, art and discussion to think about our faith. After worship, we have dinner together,

which gives us a great chance to chat more informally. WWYP is designed with teenagers in mind, but people of all ages are welcome to attend. This term WWYP will be on 30th September, 28th October, and 25th November.

Another new addition to our church's offerings for young people is Theology On Tap. This summer young adults from Greenbank and Fairmilehead Churches met once a week at Hunter's Tryst. Each week Bill and Hayley would lead a discussion, on topics that ranged from "Life After Death," and "Religion and Science" to "Sexuality and the Church." One week we also heard from those who attended the Church of Scotland's National Youth Assembly - including our own Alastair Ross!

For more information about any of these programmes get in touch with our Youth Minister, Bill Stone.

An occasional note from the Mission and Service Committee

The Church and Society Council of the Church of Scotland draws various things to our attention. Current activity includes "The Season of Creation" – a call to congregations to reflect on the wonders of creation and our own stewardship of it. More detail of this is also contained in Life and Work (September issue).

We are also called to think about the topical issue of food security – a global problem at the moment, but one that is having significant effects in Scotland also.

Finally we are reminded that the Tax Justice Bus Tour reaches Edinburgh on the 5th October – views on Tax Justice will vary – but the bus, organised by Christian Aid and Church Action on Poverty will be parked at Bristo Square.

There's a lot going on – details of the above and more are at the Church and Society page on the Church of Scotland web site.

Christian Aid

**A Highly Entertaining Evening of Music,
Songs and Lyrics by**

**THE GILBERT & SULLIVAN
SOCIETY**

**Morningside Parish
Church, Braid Road.**

**Friday 2nd Nov 2012
at 7.30pm.**

Tickets-£7.00 (including refreshments)
from Committee Members, Greenbank Parish
Church Office, pay at the door or from
www.brownpapertickets.com.

UK registered charity number 1105651. Scottish charity number SC039150.

*Omitted from the online
version of the Leaflet*

14th	Wright, Sandy Cameron, Sally Stephen John Ritchie , Eric Brown, Stewart Coghill, Ralph Davidson, Susan Inch, Gill Sweetman, Ian Thomson, David Easton, Susan Jackman
21st	John Rutherford , David Allan, Richard Denison, Kenneth Htet-Khin, Caroline Kehoe, Anne Kinnear, John Mowat, Jean Roynon-Jones, Colin Winchester
28th	Donald King , Brian Barron, Walter Crosby, Donald MacLeod, Roderick Morrison, Mairi Stevenson, Jim Young, Kathryn Sangster
Nov 4th	John George , Kenneth Aitken, Alastair Hunter, Hazel Macaulay, Kathleen Patrick, Jill Powlett-Brown, Dorothy Whitehead, Tony Foster

Coffee Rota



October	
7th	Monday Badminton
14th	The Friendship Club
21st	Country Dance Club
28th	Springboard
November	
4th	WAGs

Creche Rota



October	
7th	Janet Ferguson
14th	Rosemary McCulloch
21st	Eileen McKinnon
28th	Shona Murray
November	
4th	Lucy Teall

Flower Rota



	provided by	delivered by
October		
7th	Ruth Johnston	Moira Little
14th	Catherine Hardie	Rachel Cadell
21st	Janet Ferguson	Susan Beaumont
28th	Helen Aitken	Ishbel Emery
November		
4th	Margo Fraser	

Welcome Teams

Oct 7th	Stuart Sanders , Moira Davidson, Stuart Macmillan, John Murison, Rachel Cadell, Jenny
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Material for the November leaflet should be delivered to the Church Office or to the Editors' pigeon-hole in the Main Hall by Sunday 14th October or sent by e-mail by 9am on Tuesday 16th October to greenbankleaflet@googlemail.com

SOME DIFFICULT SAYINGS OF JESUS:

BE PERFECT...

For the past five years there has been an annual award for the best one-line joke told at a performance during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. One-liners are a big part of modern comedy. They have grown more popular in recent years, replacing the longer, story-based humour of earlier generations. However, they have been around a long time, some of the more memorable coming from the lips of Oscar Wilde (“I have nothing to declare but my genius”), Groucho Marx (“I refuse to join any club that would have me as a member”) and, more recently, Billy Connolly (“I’ve always wanted to go to Switzerland to see what the army does with those wee red knives.”) One-liners are intended to provoke laughter, but at the same time they may make an audience think again and begin to see people and things and the world in a different way.

Jesus frequently used one-liners, some of them humorous, in his teaching. Jesus was recognised by his contemporaries as a teacher. He was not simply a teacher of information (what to believe) or of morals (how to behave) but a teacher of wisdom (how to live). The most striking feature of Jesus’ teaching was his use of memorable stories and great one-liners. Very often through his stories and sayings Jesus would invite his hearers to see what they might not otherwise have seen. A new way of seeing God and the world and people could lead to a new way of living.

Many of the one-liners of Jesus have come down to us in the Gospels of the New Testament. They are presented to us as extended blocks of teaching, most notably in Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount and Luke’s Sermon on the Plain. However, we have to remember that these concise sayings were probably uttered singly, one at a time. For a wise teacher to string together too many pithy sayings all at once would be counter-productive. These provocative sayings intended to lead the hearers to new ways of seeing required time for digestion. And they would probably have been said many times to different audiences.

These surprising, arresting and sometimes humorous sayings can also be enigmatic. They can be hard to understand. Some are seemingly inexplicable. They were first spoken nearly two thousand years ago in a culture very different from ours in a language that was translated into another language before that was turned into the English version with which we are familiar. Of course, some of the sayings of Jesus are hard because they are all too easy to understand and we do not like what we hear. When Mark Twain was asked what he thought of certain obscure passages from the Bible, he said, “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that bother me. It’s the parts I do understand.” The more we understand the sayings of Jesus, the harder they are to take. Any explanation of the difficult sayings of Jesus which softens their impact, reduces their challenge and denies their radical demands, is probably mistaken.

Over the coming months this page will focus on some of these difficult sayings of Jesus. All of them will be taken from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, both of which include consider-

able collections of Jesus’ sayings as well as many of the familiar stories told to tease the mind into active thought. Some of the sayings of Jesus are so familiar and so beautiful that we can almost forget how demanding they are. “You are the salt of the earth... the light of the world.” “Consider the lilies of the field.” “Do not judge.” “Turn the other cheek.” “Give to everyone who begs from you.” “Give more than is required in a lawsuit.” “Go the second mile.” “Love your enemies.” And as if all these are not enough, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Who can be perfect? This saying from Matthew’s Gospel sounds like a commandment which cannot possibly have anything to do with us. None of us would even faintly connect ourselves with perfection. And so we try to explain away what Jesus said by claiming that this instruction was directed at a spiritual elite, that it was for the chosen few, and that it does not apply to the rest of us. Or we limit its relevance by saying that Jesus was speaking to people who knew nothing of the complex world we now live in. Or we regard this command as aspirational: what Jesus required of his followers was, and is, and will be impossible, but that may be the point. By striving towards his ideals, we live better lives than we would otherwise. Ingenious and appealing as these ways of treating the teaching of Jesus may be, they all fail to take seriously what Jesus said. And Matthew’s Jesus means what he says.

Why would Jesus demand such a thing as perfection if it were impossible? The teaching of Jesus must never be seen as advice doomed to failure. If taken as a series of requirements to be achieved by our own unassisted efforts, then perfection is impossible. But what if perfection does not mean behaving impeccably all the time? What if perfection is less about getting things right and more about loving as God loves? Being perfect does not mean acquiring all the attributes of God, becoming infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in our being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth (as the Shorter Catechism describes God). It means loving as God loves, with every breath God gives. “Be perfect” becomes a promise that carries the possibility that we may love the world as God has loved us — fully, richly, abundantly and completely.

Luke’s version of this saying encourages us to understand Matthew in this way. Luke’s Jesus says: “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.” The whole purpose of Jesus’ teaching is that his hearers should become “children of their Father in heaven”. Again and again we are given glimpses into the very heart of God, the One who loves the unlovable, comes among us in Christ, suffers our worst and rises to forgive us. Turn the cheek, give the cloak, go another mile, lend, love the enemy, be merciful, be compassionate — because that is how God loves. The one thing which makes us like God is the love which never ceases to care for others, no matter what others may do to it. We realise our true humanity, we grow into Christian maturity, we become perfect, when we forgive as God forgives and love as God loves. If we want to follow this God, fleshed in Jesus, we will be adopted into a life in which we will find ourselves loving this way before we know what we are doing. Jesus seeks neither to set impossible goals nor to shame people who cannot achieve perfection. Instead, he sets forth God’s vision of the world as God would have it, where love, genuine and unconditional, reigns.