

31st August, 2014.

Reading: Matthew 13: 31 - 35

Sermon

Many years ago mum and I went on a cruise to the Caribbean. I was minister in Drumchapel at the time and after a few weeks I was banned from mentioning the 'h' word. I was on such a high when I came back, I couldn't stop talking about our holiday. Well, today I not on the same high but I still have to mention the 'h' word since I only got back from holiday on Wednesday night.

During my holiday in Germany I spent three nights in Berlin which was quite an experience as I have't been back to Berlin since 1982. At that time, of course, the wall separating the east from the west was still very much part of life in that city.

In 1982, the British students, who were working in the same area as me, were given an all expenses paid week in Berlin which involved an organised trip into East Berlin with a tour guide from the East. We were also able to spend a further half-day in East Berlin on our own, and it has to be said, both days were quite an experience.

The day we were on our own, we met two students from Hungary and we spent a good part of the day with them. What struck me most was that when it was time for us to return across the Border to West Berlin, via Checkpoint Charlie, the girls from Hungary were not able to come with us. They had to remain behind the wall and that made quite an impression on me as a 21 year old.

This year's trip was different. The wall is no longer there, apart from the bit they've kept as a reminder of what once was, and Checkpoint Charlie has been turned into a farcical photo opportunity. There are a couple of men dressed up as American soldiers standing at the former Checkpoint and young men and women are posing beside them for photographs, young men

and women who have no experience of the Cold War and of the reality which was the Wall, and all that that caused in pain and death. I found it all quite disturbing but the other side of the coin is that thanks to those who rose up in the East back in 1989, today's young people now have the freedom to do pose at the former crossing. They have the freedom to do what so many never had the chance to do and so that I suppose is something to celebrate. What was in my mind, however, were the many hundreds who lost their lives trying to escape from the east to the west.

There is no doubt that East Berlin has dramatically changed. In the last twenty-five years, East Berlin has gone from being a grey, lifeless city to a colourful, vibrant place. So much money has been ploughed into East Germany by West Germany, and I assume also by the European community. So much money has been ploughed in to that city to improve the living conditions of those in the former Eastern block.

No longer are people standing queuing outside shops for bread as they once were. No longer are the labels cut off Levis by teachers to punish children for wearing clothes gifted by relatives in the capitalist west. The former east now has huge modern shopping centres offering clothes and household goods which those in the east were once denied, and of which they could only dream, and in addition, they now have as much food as they want. They now enjoy the same privileges as the rest of us.

But what struck me was the resentment felt by some towards the Osis, as they call them, towards the East Germans. One of the reasons for the resentment is that so much money was deducted from salaries in the west to fund the vast building projects in the East. I'm now told that the streets in the east are better than in the west and more expensive paving stones have been used in some areas than they would ever have been allowed to use in the west. The way the money was spent is eating away at some but then the East missed out for so long.

But the resentment runs deeper than that. The East Germans were described to me as being so lazy because they didn't, for example, maintain their houses during the Cold War. The reason I was given was that they neglected their properties just because they would have got no return on anything they did. Everything was owned by the state. That's not accepted by some in the west as a good reason.

However, the reality is that families in the East didn't have the money to spend on such luxuries as external paint, unlike those in the west, nor would it have been acceptable, but that seems to have been forgotten by some in West Germany. What has also been forgotten is that vast sums of money were poured into West Germany by us after the Second World War to bring their country back up to an acceptable standard. Money is easy to accept and not so easy to give.

What has all this got to do with our Scripture reading for today? Well, on Thursday at Messy Church I told the story of the mustard seed. We looked at our community in the various activities in which both adults and children shared. Some looked at the changes which had taken place and were asked to consider what other changes they may still want to see which would help improve life in Lochgilphead.

But what can we do? As individuals possibly very little but our combined efforts can make a huge difference. Where money is required, fundraising is a joint effort but there are also small things which each of us can do on our own to help improve the lives of individuals, unless of course we feel like some of those in West Germany and resent the lack of effort made by some people to improve their own lot in life. Why should we bother, when they haven't?

At Messy Church, we also thought about the news that we hear on television at different times. Most of it is bad. We hear about everything from tsunamis, landslides and wars to famines because of drought and floods. The problems are immense. It is way beyond us to do anything about the ensuing

problems and yet that was something we also thought when the Cold War was at its height.

What we saw there was that prayer and the combined efforts of many thousands of people brought about the destruction of the wall and of the regime which treated its citizens so badly, in many respects. A small act by one person which is repeated by others can change the course of history. Could the same solution work for Palestine and Israel, for North Korea, for the Ukraine, for terrorism? Maybe we think not because the problems seem so immense, but the wall came down.

The man in today's parable planted a seed so small that you could hardly see it. He watered it and he cared for it and his tiny mustard seed grew into the largest of all the plants. It grew into a tree, a tree which, according to the parable, provided shelter for the birds.

The kingdom of God is like that, so says the parable. It started with small beginnings and grew into something which has worldwide significance. The kingdom of God provides shelter for God's people, for tax collectors and sinners, for those who are marginalised by society, for those are undeserving in the eyes of their communities and their countries.

Some see the mustard plant as a dangerous plant which has the power to take over. It's an annual which gets cut back every year but which has shed its seeds by that time and so takes off again the following year. The significance of that is that the kingdom of God cannot be destroyed. The tiny seeds of faith are planted far and wide and no matter what man does to the Church, no matter what man attempts to do to the kingdom of God, it will continue to grow and provide shelter for those in need.

The kingdom of God flourished in the East under persecution. Now only 20% of Berliners are associated with a Church. However, the seeds are still planted and will continue to influence life in what has become a very secular society. Who knows how faith will impact on that society or on our society in the future. From small beginnings, great things can happen.

Here in Lochgilphead, we only need faith the size of a mustard seed to make a difference. We only need to act, to show compassion, to provide shelter to those in need in whatever form that might take. We only need to perform a small act and combine our efforts with the efforts of others, before leaving the rest to God. Who knows how our seemingly insignificant actions will impact on the lives of others and on the community in which we live.