

Hello everyone

Events can change our lives can't they? We all know that at the moment. The lockdown that we are slowly emerging from changed our lives dramatically over night and now we are starting to work out and build what the future is going to be like.

It's not quick work, is it? There have been many times in my life where events have required me to come to terms with change. Often it has been with the offer of a new job 100's of miles from where Norma and I had successfully been building our lives. At other times it has been difficult news to digest and then there are the times that I look back on and smile because at the time they were big changes to my life, but in reality they were small simple changes that made family life more efficient and easier for everyone but especially my mother.

I'm thinking about the day my mother introduced the family of my father, two brothers and me to the sock drawer. It was her brilliant solution to a problem we'd been struggling with. All three brothers and dad wore socks and by the time we were into secondary school, all the sock in the house were the same size. So my

mothers elegant solution was to tell us that no longer would she be separating socks by person. Now washed socks in pairs or not would be put in the sock drawer on the landing at the top of the stairs from which we could all find our own socks as required. A brilliant solution but with surprising consequences. For now we had to own up to the state of our socks, the number of 'lost socks' and indeed whether we actually had enough pairs of socks for the whole week.

A trivial example given what many are going through at the present. But chosen on purpose to show how priorities and change can come from very unexpected corners.

I'm sure as you think back you will have similar life changing events to ponder on.

Disruption in the household sock system led to organisation that we all found helpful. In some ways it was an example of a very modern system that many churches are looking at from an American programme called growing the church young. Basically, this is all about organising church a round giving people responsibility for parts of church when they show they are willing whatever age they are and whatever role

they play in the church. It's slogan is giving people the keys.

Handing over responsibility to people when they can cope with it.

In the book of acts we see a similar process happening as the early church organises itself.

We don't read anything about reorganised sock delivery systems or handing keys over, but Luke does tell us how the disciples realise they need help to support their bold preaching of the message of Jesus Christ, son of God.

The word of God spread and the number of followers in Jerusalem increased. Luke writes a neatly organised account of the spread of the early church. As people are able they are given more responsibility depending on the situations faced.

One of the people chosen to help out is Stephen. This man full of God's grace and power performs great wonders and signs among the people .

Just as we today do when the church helps out to provide holiday clubs, friendship lunches the guild or school work.

Maybe we just see that as ordinary work, but it 's not. It is us showing signs among the people around us. It's something we should acknowledge.

The breadth of groups at the East church can be seen in the team structure of the kirk session. Each team set up to focus on particular needs of the whole world wide church.

Stephen like Peter and John before him meets opposition as he follows in the footsteps of Jesus.

This time the authorities are concerned that by talking about Jesus as Stephen does, the customs and laws handed down from Moses would be changed.

But Stephen stands up and addresses the authorities. He retells the story of the whole experience of God by his people from the time of Abraham related in Genesis to the reign of Solomon, the time when the first book of kings tells us the first temple was built. The differences between Stephen's view and the authorities centres around the temple. Stephen is clear that doesn't live in homes made by humans, but in the whole world.

Heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool he quotes from the 3rd section of Isaiah. It's a beautiful

picture isn't it from the last 10 chapters of Isaiah written unlike the earlier parts, once the remnant of Israel that had been taken into exile by the Babylonians in 586 BCE returned to their land about 70 years later to find a life of great hardship waiting for them. It was a life that fell far short of the glorious descriptions of the restored kingdom from the earlier prophets like Ezekiel.

Third Isaiah addresses this disappointment with the idea of a new heaven and earth. The former things will not be remembered. This future glory is not located in any kind of historical time period. This will be a new heaven and a new earth and God links the two by resting on both his heavenly throne and his earthly footstool.

The authorities are not happy that Stephen uses this description to show that the message he preaches of Jesus sits in continuity with the story of the scriptures that have been handed down.

When they heard this they gnashed their teeth and Stephen was stoned and killed. One of the witnesses was a young man called Saul. He held the coats at that point and of course we meet him later in Luke's

narrative as Paul who writes much of our New Testament.

This bold action of Stephen following in Jesus' footsteps turns out to be a game changer for the early church.

Luke has told us that the followers of Jesus were expected to be witnesses in Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

Up until now, the signs and wonders have taken place in Jerusalem. With the death of Stephen, all Jesus' followers except the disciples have to leave Jerusalem. They are scattered and went from place to place proclaiming the word.

And in fact some find themselves in Samaria. Luke will go on to tell us their stories as the followers grapple with questions of what it means to be part of the church. They wonder about the basis of boundaries and traditions in the church. Answers we still live out each day and questions we still grapple with each day.

AS we look at that over the coming weeks it is going to chime with us as time and again as we consider what the church as we emerge from lockdown will look like.

The East church kirk session has not set a date for reopening yet, but I would urge you to keep the picture that Stephen highlighted for us of God linking his throne in heaven to his footstool on earth.

It's a picture of God and his church. What kind of a house will you build for me says God. Did not my hands make all these things?

God is already working with us in the world. He is sharing in all that his people experience.

This idea of a new heaven and earth is not about two separate places. It's easy to think of a new heaven and a new earth. Thy kingdom come we say and Isaiah offers us a picture of what that really means. Heaven and earth linked.

The events around Stephen and the scattering of the followers broadened where the church worked and this led to changes in how it worked.

Are we in 2020 facing a similar set of as yet unknown questions?

What do you think?

Stephen full of grace and power did great wonders and signs among the people. God said Heaven is my throne and the earth my footstool.

What are the wonders and signs we will continue to do
And who will we hand the keys to as we start to answer the questions that will shape the church of the future.

Peace be with you

Amen