

CHANGE

Matthew 11.1-6 & 2 Corinthians 3.18

I've been thinking a lot about Haiti lately. It is hard for us to comprehend a natural disaster of the magnitude of the Haiti earthquake. Coming from Hawke's Bay, I grew up with stories of their great earthquake. It was a biggie - 7.8 on the Richter scale (Haiti was 7) – and as a result the collapsing buildings killed 258 people. 1931 was long before my time – but my father told me of the road moving in waves - and his family standing under the cupboards catching the plates as they fell out. And the earthquake brought changes. It was because of my grandparents' experience with the plates falling out of the cupboards that in the family home I grew up in – all the top cupboards had catches on them. The earthquake toppled brick chimneys – and in house after house the heavy brick chimneys fell through the roof – so a new building code was established requiring chimneys to be reinforced with steel. Almost the whole of downtown Napier was destroyed – a rapid rebuilding programme saw factories, shops and civic buildings re-established in the fashionable style of the day – a style known today as art-deco, making Napier the art-deco capital of NZ and because of that it is a present day tourist attraction

While it is true that catastrophes bring about change - things like earthquakes, tidal waves or war - It is also true that change happens anyway...

My earliest memories are of going to the corner shop for all our supplies (because there weren't any supermarkets). Bread wasn't pre-wrapped or sliced – There wasn't much choice of variety – you got a loaf called a barracuda – the people at the shop wrapped a strip of brown paper around the middle and stuck it down with sellotape. Milk came in glass bottles, and the top couple of inches were cream. We paid for these things with pennies – except for the half pint bottles of milk we got at school, which were free. When I was 3 years old I went to UK – the only way to get there was by boat. I don't remember exactly, but I think it took about a month to get there! For entertainment in the evening we sat around the radio and listened to "Life with Dexter." Music was recorded onto vinyl discs – and my dad, being a pioneer of the modern technology made himself a disc cutting machine and cut records for local musicians. Sometimes at Christmas there would be a phone-call from the relations in Scotland – but not every year, because such phone-calls were expensive.

In less than half a century how the world has changed! Of course, it is fashionable to say that the church must make rapid changes too. Depending largely on your personality you may think *either*:

The church needs to be on the cutting edge of change, relevant to and communicating with our technological post-modern age

Or... you may think

The church needs to be a refuge, a place of calm where those worn down by rapid change and re-structuring so prevalent in our society will find strength from traditional values and an unchanging gospel

So which will it be?

Well, in this parish I believe we will have elements of both! And, once again depending on your personality you may find that re-assuring or unsettling!

Since I have come from a different church tradition to work among the Methodist family I have been given a Lawbook and a heap of booklets to read – understandably so, because I need to know about the Methodist ethos. So it is in a booklet called "Ethos of NZ Methodism" Donald Phillipps writes of Methodists on p2, "*There is something about our persistent desire to always be changing things, in our congregation and in our society, which suggests to me that an essential part of Methodist ethos is never to be satisfied with things as they are.*"

One of the current church-life gurus, Dan Sutherland, says "In a church change is like oxygen, essential for life and growth."

Presently we at ECB Methodist Parish are involved in some major changes. Essentially, we are moving away from the idea that the ministry in this parish will be performed by paid clergy. Instead we are saying that *all* the members of this church are gifted in ministry. This is both the Biblical model and the pattern of the primitive church. Some will offer pastoral care, others lead worship, or preach and teach, administer, offer practical help, reach out to the needy, spread the gospel, officiate the sacraments, conduct weddings and funerals or pray.

We're not looking for someone from outside to come and do some of these things for us – and we're not expecting our retired presbyters to take up the slack. Presbyters, like myself, will be available to resource and encourage you – but we will not be the ministers of the church – you will be. You may have seen that I will be preaching here over the next 6 weeks – but that is only so I can talk to as many of you as possible about this process of change – and after that I don't intend to have an up-front role at all. If you want a 'proper minister' (a Reverend) to preach, lead worship, visit you, take your wedding or funeral or officiate the sacraments, under Local Shared Ministry you probably won't get one. Lay people (members of this congregation) will be trained and licensed to do all these things.

Let me tell you about William. Williams' father was killed in the Peninsular War, fighting for England against the French. His mother wisely decided to move with her two sons to an area of Warwickshire where the local school offered free quality education to local residents. William went on to become a low-church evangelical Anglican minister. But it was what he did at school that gained him fame. *It was during a game of football against a team called Bigside in 1823 that William caught the ball in his arms. Instead of placing the ball on the ground and retiring, he disregarded the rules and rushed forwards with the ball in his hands towards the opposite goal.* So today at Rugby School in England there is a plaque that reads:
"THIS STONE COMMEMORATES THE EXPLOIT OF WILLIAM WEBB ELLIS WHO WITH A FINE DISREGARD FOR THE RULES OF FOOTBALL AS PLAYED IN HIS TIME FIRST TOOK THE BALL IN HIS ARMS AND RAN WITH IT THUS ORIGINATING THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURE OF THE RUGBY GAME"

Whether the incident is history or myth is a matter of dispute... but change did occur. It was not however instant. Eleven years later another student of Rugby School recalled "In my first year, 1834, running with the ball to get a try by touching down within goal was not absolutely forbidden, but a jury of Rugby boys of that day would almost certainly have found a verdict of 'justifiable homicide' if a boy had been killed in running in."

How do we cope when someone comes up with an idea that seems radically different from our expectations? What should we do when a suggestion seems to be in disregard for the traditions we hold dear? This brings me to some things that I'd like us all to do over the next few months

1) Top Shelve

Practice "top shelving" new ideas. When a totally new idea comes – be it for example Local Shared Ministry, The Ministry Support Team or lay sacramental ministers – some people will want to embrace it straight away (they are the innovators and early adopters and make up only 16% of the population). An equal number of people will want to dismiss it out of hand. "We've never done it that way before." Have you ever heard that said? Ralph Neighbour wrote a book called, *The seven last words of the church*. You know what they are? ... "We've never done it that way before." To judge new ideas we need a frame of reference. We need to weigh them against other similar ideas

We could say to William Webb Ellis "You can't do that!" Or... we could ask, "What would happen if we did allow that? Have the rules of football been changed and adapted before? If so, where and when and what happened? Is it too dangerous? Is it more exciting?" In the case of William it took a few years for his new ideas to percolate through. So my advice in facing new ideas is this – resist the urge too quickly embrace them or too readily reject them. Instead "top shelve" them. Just put them aside until you get more information on the same subject Spend some time getting a frame of reference – where has this idea occurred before? What happened? How does it fit with the gospel and our own church tradition? Could it provide us new ways of being effective as a church in this place?

2) Move from "you should" to "we could"

This is a difficult transition, but we need to move for a "you should" to a "we could" mentality. One of the things that a new minister has to learn to deal with is the "you shoulds" of his or her congregation. There is never any shortage of suggestions of things to do. A minister is told, "You should..."

- Preach from the Bible more
- Spend more time with the youth
- Get out visiting more
- Start a Sunday School
- Begin a Rest Home ministry

Promote CWS better
Be more involved with the Connexion
Promote Lifewise”

A wise minister learns to respond “would you like to spearhead that for us.” But under Local Shared Ministry there is no-one to “you should.” In the words of Dave Mullan (who brought this process to NZ) “The Cavalry won’t be coming”. No Presbyterian will be coming to do any of these things. We are only left with “we could” All the gifts needed to do God’s work in this place are already here. And the things that “we could” do in this place are truly impressive.

3) Give thanks for the past embrace the future

The Methodist Church in New Zealand is not what it used to be. Some of you will remember when the churches were growing in number and size, the youth work was vibrant, and there was a wonderful expectation that the church union talks were going to establish the church as a force in the community as never before. Many have spoken to me of the great days here that you had when David Bell was presbyter. Thank God for these events of the past. Thank God for the memories and heritage that have made us who we are. I’m a student of church history. I love it. But it is *history*.

There are things happening *in our own day* that are exciting. According to the last census the Methodist Church in NZ is growing. But it’s not the middle class Pakeha churches that are turning the statistics around – but our Pacifica churches, particularly in South Auckland. There are shades here of John Wesley and the Wesleyan revival that brought the working class flooding into the church. I had the privilege of having a hand in organising a Methodist youth rally in Sth Auckland last year – 2000 young people showed up! They were keen, committed .. and loud. The face of the church is changing. Among churches like ours many are turning to Local Shared Ministry. A quarter of the Auckland Anglican parishes are using the model. These churches are more relational than before, people are more involved than before. There is new life.... a new future. While some may see this as a last resort for churches that either can’t afford or can’t find a presbyter. Others like myself, Dave Mullan and Val Nichol see this as an exciting model that is a return to Biblical church life and breathes new life and hope into congregations.

Lets’ give thanks for the past and embrace the future. Having said that...

4) Give priority to internal changes

I have been thinking about the way that *our faith* and *our love* change. These unseen changes are more gradual and more significant than the in-your-face external changes that we encounter day by day. We read this morning a favourite verse of mine. Let me unpack it a bit for you...

“And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.” 2 Corinthians 3.18 NRSV

There is a word in v18 that, depending on the version of the Bible you have, is variously translated “reflecting as a mirror” or “contemplating.” Both are good translations – and it is true that, as we look to Jesus (contemplate him), we begin to reflect his light to others. In fact the more we look to him, the more we are changed to become like him, and the light gets brighter and brighter. The verb “transformed” is also interesting. It is literally “metamorphosis” (changed from the inside to the out like a caterpillar changes to a butterfly). This is marvellous! And it is in the passive mood. It is not *us* that do the changing. It is the Spirit who does this as we open ourselves to Christ. And he does it bit by bit “from one degree of glory to another”

Now “glory” is a funny religious word. It is both vague and ambiguous. In the First Testament it is used both of the physical shining presence of God, and symbolically of any revelation of his being. This idea is carried though to the New Testament, along with an additional thought of the hope of glory – ie looking forward to the fuller revelation of Christ at the end of the age. Here in Corinthians the word is used of the presence of Christ which is able to be seen in us his people. Listen Trinity/ All Hallows Methodist: We are to reflect his glory!

It is also plural. It is not *me* that is being changed. With our Western individualism, so often we read these promises in terms of *I* and *me*, but in this verse it is *we*, the church, that reflect the light and are changed to be brighter and brighter. This is the glowing attraction of a Christian community that loves one another.

Let's think for a moment about... **Our Love.** I recently attended a church service that focused on a couple who were celebrating their diamond wedding anniversary – 60 years of marriage! My what depth of relationship could come with 60 years knowing another person. This couple used the occasion of their Anniversary to renew their wedding vows –and it was a very special moment as they stood hand in hand at the front of the church. What do you say about a couple who have been married 60 years? You'd think that they'd have a pretty good understanding of each other! It made me think of some of the couples that I have had counselling sessions with before their weddings. I don't worry about the ones that have issues to work out so much as those that are all starry-eyed and infatuated with each other.

I say, "Let's talk for a bit about how you might handle your finances."

And they say, "Oh, we won't have any problems with money, we love each other."

I think, "Oh, dear!"

And I worry, because I know that infatuation can quickly wear off. Far better to have a couple that are fully aware of each other's faults, than to have someone who naively thinks that their partner is perfect. But the sort of knowledge about each other and commitment to each other that this couple had after 60 years, was of a different quality altogether – it was diamond quality. They had grown and grown in their love for each other. So the question comes of our own relationships - what are the internal and unseen changes that are taking place, and have been taking place? It's a good thing to stop for a moment and examine our relationships with spouse/ family/ friends/ church ... and with our God. And ask, "Is this relationship becoming deeper ... or are we drifting apart? Do I take my partner for granted – or do I appreciate him or her more than I ever have?" Do I take my God for granted – or do I appreciate him more than I ever have?"

Change is always taking place – sometimes it's negative – sometimes positive. Our love is always changing. The Christian solution to prevent negative change, and bring positive change is "turn back" Make a commitment. It is when we commit ourselves to each other – when we commit ourselves to our God that love grows and positive change comes. How committed are we to loving our partner? loving our family? Loving our church? loving our God?

If change is always gradually and quietly happening to our love the same is true of **Our Faith.** As we mature in our faith, it is natural for us to re-assess and re-evaluate what we believe and who we believe in. While for a new Christian it may be enough to simply say, "Jesus is the answer" sooner or later we are likely to come to the stage of asking "How is Jesus the answer?" and "Where can we see faith in Christ making a difference in this particular situation?" So it is that we are drawn to look again to Jesus and ask afresh, "Who is this man?" and "How is it that he can be God coming to me?" and "What does it really mean that he died on a cross so long ago?"

We try to picture God using concepts and images – but our faith changes, and in the end our own concepts prove to be too small for him. Or God proves to be too big. The old concepts don't fit – doubts may arise. To have honest doubts about things, that we had assumed for years to be true, is not necessarily bad or unhealthy – on the contrary our questions and doubts can form the pathway to renewed faith and revised hopes. For our faith to grow sometimes it also needs revising. God works in unexpected ways and, to keep up with him, we need to make changes, revisions - revising our hopes and renewing our commitment. Our faith is always changing. With attention it can become firm, renewed and strong – a strong tower or an oaken staff. But with neglect it can disappear altogether. Once again, the Christian solution to prevent negative change, and bring positive change is to make a commitment. The essence of faith is a commitment of our lives into the hands of a loving God. How has our faith changed over the years? Is it stronger or weaker? Have we grown in favour with God? Have we allowed God to mould us and shape us as he wishes? We're all changing. In internal and unseen ways we're all changing, and God is asking us this morning to make him Lord of those changes ... to allow him to shape us.

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7 February 2010