

The Challenge of Change

Readings: Jeremiah 29 verses 1-7 ; Matthew 5 verses 38-48

It's been a very strange winter. No ice. No snow. And the wettest winter since records began. Everybody talks about Climate Change. And without doubt the climate is changing. But so is everything else and it's not all the fault of humans interfering with nature. Change is written into the very nature of things. It happens in spite of us and not just because of us. Nor is change confined to the weather. Our political climate is forever changing. So, too, our social climate. And the Church is not exempt. I was at a Circuit Treasurer's meeting on Thurs and the question at issue was a change in the Assessment due from each Church to meet the changes due in the next 2 years. I am bound to say it was an unproductive meeting!

So I want us to think about Change this morning and what our response should be. I begin with a parable.

Three men were marooned on a desert island. And they were told that overnight the island would be swamped by a tidal wave. What would they do? The first man said; " I would eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die". The second said; " I would retreat to a sacred grove and offer sacrifice and say prayers to my God." The third said; " I would call my wisest men together and study how to live under water".

Three responses to the challenge of change. And all three are evident today. There are always those who refuse to face reality; who live for the moment in complete abandonment with not a thought for the future. That's a purely selfish response. The 2nd response is characteristic of a certain type of religion. Retreat into a sacred world of piety and hope to God that He might do something. The third is, to my mind, the Christian response. Accept that things are going to change and try to adapt to that change.

It's what Jeremiah recommended to those people who had been carted off into Exile in Babylon. Settle down. Make yourselves at home! Work out how to worship God and live as the people of God in a strange and hostile environment.

It's the policy Paul advocated when the Christian gospel was taken to an alien world. "To the Jews I became as a Jew in order to win Jews. To those outside the Law I became as one outside the Law; to the weak I became weak that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men that I might save some".

And it's the policy that God adopted in order to save humankind. Faced with the reality of a human race which had rebelled and turned its back on Him He became human! — in order to save humanity.

Let nobody pretend that this is the easy way. It is fraught with danger and difficulty. And the danger is that in the process we shall allow ourselves to become totally absorbed into what we are trying to change. We lose our identity as Christians. But what's the alternative? To give up all hope and to live selfishly for the moment? To retreat into a holy huddle and sing hymns and say prayers and separate ourselves from the rest of humanity? Or find a way to live as Christians in an alien environment and so win people for Christ?

I think there are 2 areas in which we have to engage with our society. Belief and Behaviour.

Belief: It astounds me that so many Christians are committed to a belief system which is based on a very literal acceptance of Biblical texts and statements. The obvious example is in relation to Science. Last week it was reported that 1/3rd of American Christians are still wedded to the belief that the world was created in 6 days; that creation itself took place in 4004 BC and that the Adam & Eve story is historically true. Nor is it just American Christians. All over the UK private Faith

schools are being opened up which are committed to teaching the children the same thing. Worse still our secular education system teaches children an evolutionary understanding of creation but if they come to Church on Sunday they are taught exactly the opposite. Its no wonder they are confused. And its no wonder that they opt for the scientific explanation and reject the Church altogether. But its not just in the area of science that our "belief systems" are seen as locked in a time warp. Its in the cultural area as well, and nowhere is this more evident than in the area of human sexuality.

Behaviour: So often Christian behaviour is defined in negative terms. Christians are those who do not do certain things and are regularly depicted a kill-joys. Methodists have a reputation of being against all alcoholic drinks. This kill-joy image is not only unfortunate. It is damaging in the extreme. We need to engage with our contemporaries in a more positive way. Its what we do that matters, not what we don't do. So Jesus gave us a thumb-nail sketch of what such positive behaviour might look like. "If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn to him the other also! If anyone forces you to go one mile; go with him two miles! Love your enemy and pray for those who persecute you"! In other words non-retaliation and going the extra mile and seeking the best interests of others above your own ought to be characteristic of Christian behaviour.

Far from reflecting the mores of society such behaviour challenges the values and standards of society. It was this kind of behaviour which characterised the first Christians and which was a powerful factor in converting others to Christ. We sang earlier about being " clothed in Christ's humanity" and the most powerful evangelistic message we could convey would be in becoming a Christ to our neighbour.