

Lent 5

There is a dilemma as to how we use history and relate to the past.

On the one hand there are those who strongly assert that those who forget the past will be condemned to repeat it. We must know our history. We must know what happened in the past and learn from it. Tradition is important – tradition a word literally meaning ‘the things that are handed down’. Conservative – traditional. On the other hand, there is “the history is bunk” school. A view that says what is important is “now” – and in living in that moment. We should not be tied to the past. This is a new moment – and we are free to do things differently. Be liberal, free.

These two views could apply to how we live our lives, or do business, or operate within institutions. . . .even like the church. And I am sure we can see merit in both points of view; and we can also see the problems with both points of view. For the conservative nothing would ever change; for the liberal you could easily lose one’s way and not know from where you have come. Take for example the two brothers from the gospel story of Jesus about the prodigal son. The younger brother was into freedom and the history is bunk school. The older brother clearly was attuned to his responsibilities, his role, the tradition – a much more conservative view of the world. And neither were perfect.

We can sense that there are right times to be conservative, say within a period of rapid change and disorientation; and there are the right time to jettison history and free up the situation. In our own lives – there are times to say – what the heck, I need to test my own freedom; and then there are times to be constrained by tradition, expectation. But then the question arises with regard to our faith and the life of this congregation? How should we understand our faith journey? Once it is set – should we just follow it? It is after all the rock on which I will build my life. Or should we be always open to new possibilities, new understandings – and then possibly be accused that we don’t know what we believe, and are wishy washy.

The great prophet of the Babylonian exile we know as Second Isaiah, had to grapple with this issue. And as we will see, achieved a helpful balance between a conservative and a liberal mindset. However, we need first to be aware of the context.

The Children of Israel were carried off as exiles to Babylon in about 586 BC. They had forsaken the Covenant –and as the prophets warned, this would happen. They had gone after other gods. The kings ruled with no justice and compassion. Crudely put the Children of Israel were punished. In exile however, there was a great flowering of writing, reflection and particularly history-writing about who they were, where they had come from, and where they had indeed gone wrong. In exile they saw it was all about the Covenant, the promises of God, the way they should live and how they had failed. Scholars indeed today speak of a historian drawing together the various threads of the national story and leaving us those early books of the Old Testament. Clearly there was here a conservative mindset: those who forget their history will be condemned to repeat it. Exile was a good time to stop and reflect.

Earlier this year, in the lectionary we had the beginning of Isaiah 43. You may recall those beautiful verses

“But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he formed you, O Israel.
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.” (43:1)

Redemption, and restoration and return to Israel is promised. However, what the prophet emphasises in this chapter is not the judgement of God on the children of Israel (better keep the law or you will be punished), but how in former times God had saved them. So in our passage today

“Thus says the Lord who makes a way in the seas, a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished and quenched like a wick.”(16)

In other words here is a reminder from their history of their salvation from bondage in Egypt. The implication is clear – God was loving and compassionate then, and surely God will be like that again. God is not simply a judge – who condemns you for eternity for past wrongs (like being in exile in Babylon). God is faithful to the Covenant, and will also save again.

However, there is then this new – imaginative – liberating insight. The prophet immediately after the words I have quoted announces God saying:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” (18-19)

All right – do not be tied to your history, even if that history does reveal God’s very nature, and God’s redeeming love to you. That is past – now something new is happening. The call is to perceive this new thing unfolding in your midst. This new thing will be like a way in the desert; there will even be water in the desert. There will be a new life for the Children of Israel. The tradition, the history is not discounted; rather it will be superseded – something new will be breaking forth.

In a strange way both the apostle Paul, and Mary of Bethany encountered resistance by others to God doing new things in their lives: they wanted to break through those traditional sources of resistance, and see, even celebrate this newness.

Let’s take Mary first. This incident is recorded in various forms in all of the gospels. We particularly remember its dramatic nature – using a hugely expensive and over the top gesture of adoration; then there is the whinge of Judas; and the awkward aside of Jesus about always having the poor with you. Judas’ reaction - despite the gospel writers attempt to besmirch his character - is however, not unreasonable. Indeed I think it would be my reaction. At West Hawthorn we famously do not spend too much on ourselves – but want to make sure we can spend as much as possible in service of others – like support BCO. This is an action that comes from our tradition; a tradition of service and standing with the poor and marginalised. It is what the prophets of the Old Testament had seen was needed in the nation’s life; and serving the poor is what Jesus himself also said was important. Remember the rich young ruler to whom he said: “go and sell all that you own and give to the poor”. However, like with the prophet Isaiah, history, or here this tradition of service, is not wrong. History is OK. But, there is however, a new thing unfolding; a new and dynamic way of living that is emerging – and it centres on Christ’s imminent death on the cross.

Mary saw this clearly. She had just seen the life of her brother end; indeed he had been buried. However, as a sign - Jesus had brought him back to life. It had caused a stir – and as a consequence there was increased mumbling among the religious leadership against him. But Mary could join the dots – this person was actually now going to die for her sake. For her sake, he had re-united her with a precious brother. In a larger context, for everyone’s sake, he was now going to be killed. . . and she needed to mark that understanding. It wasn’t that Judas was a thief (that just looks like a later addition to the text), it was that he didn’t see, unlike Mary, the path of Jesus to the cross which would ultimately lead to a new life and a new relationship with God. Former things, like service and help for the poor were not necessarily bad; but behold a new thing unfolding before their very eyes. In life she anointed him; in death she wished to do that too – but he was not dead but alive.

And likewise with Paul: Paul’s authority within this Christian community of Philippi, was being questioned. Status and authority were critical issues for that community. It was not the content of the proclamation of the preacher, it was the pedigree of the preacher which was more important. For the Philippians, could Paul actually be believed to bring in the joy and happiness about which he so infectiously speaks?

So on the one hand Paul wants to stake his claim that he is a person who does have the credentials, the history, the past which would lead you to believe he has the “goods”. He appeals to the conservative mindset. Yes, and quoting here, “he was circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law blameless.” (Phil 3: 5-6). Impeccable. And Paul as he always does, uses his past for all it worth. But that at the end of the day that amounts for nothing.

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss, because of Christ.”

Indeed he later goes on to say that he forgets what lies behind, he must now “strain forward to what lies ahead.” The past is past – important, not irrelevant, but nowhere near as important as to who Jesus Christ is now in his life. Jesus now is this “new thing that is happening” and using the phrase of Isaiah, he is to forget former things.

No longer is it a simple split – a choice between the past, tradition and history; or new things, the future and freedom. **Rather the past is qualified through the lens of who Jesus is for us now.** So it is not that we should no longer help the poor, or in terms of Paul, have a sense of one’s personal history and place within that sweep of tradition and practice. But see, always see, the new things that Christ is doing; be open to them.

The message is that it is too easy to just stick with history and tradition, or alternatively just throw everything out. Rather: know the past, but at all times be open to something new in Christ. However, also note that questing and searching for the way of Christ is costly. In Mary’s case it was literally a year’s wages for the perfume. And in Paul’s case, it is always a strain, a struggle to reach for the goal.... which is out there in front of him. . . all the time drawing him forward.

The key however, is: do you perceive that God is always doing a new thing. As the prophet records the words of Yahweh: “I am about to do a new thing; do you not perceive it?” . . . a good Lenten reminder as we travel to Easter