

Theme: New Things

Isaiah 48:1 – 11, Mark 2:18 – 22

On a recent Monday, I was doing housework at home when I heard a voice inside me saying “Come to me”. I thought God was asking me to come and spend some time with him. (I hadn’t opened my Bible yet that day.)

You would have dropped everything immediately to go and be with God. I was; “Yeah, I’ve got a bit to do here first” but the voice was insistent “Come to me, come to me.” Eventually I got the message and went into my office. I curled up in my armchair with my Bible but God was still saying “Come to me”.

“What is with that? I am with you God.” Then I turned to look out the window to see this fantastic view of the school playing field. I realised that God wasn’t talking to me at all. Rather he was saying to those in the community “Come to me”. God’s heart is for all the people out there. He is already calling those he loves.

The Lord has this amazing way of showing us new things. He turns our expectations inside out and upside down so that we can see things through his eyes.

What things does God want to turn inside out and upside down for us as a church?

I believe he wants us to take our eyes off ourselves and what we have always done. God wants us to see others through his eyes, to have the same love for them that he does, and to reach out to them with his love and power.

This is what God himself did through Jesus Christ. The risen Christ is already at work revealing himself to people in the world, just as he is to us. The Holy Spirit is calling us to work with him. This will mean setting aside some of our pre-conceived ideas and mind-sets and daring to walk with him into new things. It’s risky business but I’ve seen you take risks before and they are paying off now. So I am sure that we can walk together with him, into the new things he is calling us to.

The tricky thing is to discover what God’s new things are. The Isaiah passage shows the Lord’s frustrations with his chosen people’s lack of obedience. They have failed to care for the weak and downtrodden. Last week Owen rightly pointed out that the church too is often failing.

The prophet reminds the people God’s words are true. God says he will speak again and show them new things. But the new things are not specified. “I’ve spoken and I will speak again. Listen up! Get ready for me to speak” is the sense I get from this passage.

I sometimes envy Jesus’ followers hearing directly from him. Imagine what it was like to be in the physical presence of this amazing man. Very often Jesus speaks in response to a question or a challenge; spoken or implicit. In the instance from Mark 2, Jesus is asked why his followers don’t fast. The inference was that Jesus’ followers

were not as spiritual as the pious Pharisees. While the Law only required fasting annually on the Day of Atonement, they fasted Mondays and Thursdays throughout the year. Externally they looked very pious indeed.

In other instances he goes on the attack against the outward show of piety they make; handwashing etc.¹ Here Jesus contrasts their outward piety with the inward joy of his followers. He likens it to a wedding. At a wedding people are having fun, filled with joy, eating and drinking with the couple. At this stage of Jesus' followers journey with him there is no reason to fast.

What is happening is that the gap, between what people expected the Messiah to do and what he actually did, is widening. The Pharisees aren't coping with new ways.

Next Jesus goes on to illustrate the difficulty with taking the old things and adding to them as they are. The patch on old clothing doesn't work. The new will harm the old if we try that. The same with new wine in old brittle wineskins. As the wine ferments it would explode the old skins.

Jesus is not saying the old should be done away with. Nowhere does he say throw out the old garment or wineskin. Paul explains in Romans 11 that the Christian church has been grafted in to the original tree. Some of the original branches have been broken off, true, but it is clear God has not rejected Israel.

Jesus is saying that his teachings have superseded the old ways of piety. The old must not hold back the new. He himself is the new wine. Jesus came to relate to humanity in a totally different way than the Jews had related to Yahweh. Jesus came as a flesh and blood human being to bring us the life the Jews had not been able to grasp.

So what are the new wine skins? Many have tried to find patterns or programs that make it clear just what the new wine skins are. My take (and ponder this for yourself 'cos I could be wrong) is that the new wine skins are revealed to us, in the community and the culture in which we live.

Owen said that people today have little interest in church. 100% true. (Interesting to note though that the institutional church was up 3 places to 14th in the 2013/2014 UMR mood of the nation report. As far as trust in institutions go it is still quite low though.)² Yet people are very interested in spirituality. We see it expressed in things like Anzac Day, a love for the environment, meaningful ritual.

Our challenge is to take the new wine, that freedom, abundance, humanity fully alive in Jesus Christ, to a culture that is very different to the old way of being. When everyone believed in God, all we had to do was get them to acknowledge their sin and come to Christ. Billy Graham cleaned up.

¹ Mark 7:1 – 5, Luke 11:37 – 53

² http://umr.co.nz/sites/umr/files/mood_of_the_nation_2013_release_2014_final_2.pdf

No more. Now we have to earn the right to say anything at all. People need to know we care before they will have any interest in our message. And we need to learn to share that message way differently to how we did in the past.

We have to be much better listeners than we are speakers. We have two ears. There 3 very good questions that each of us could learn with much benefit:
What did you mean by that?
Where did you get that idea from?
Have you considered.....?

We need to learn to share our story – very briefly! If someone asks us a question about faith, we need to answer their question, from our own experience, in one sentence. Then we shut up and let them respond.

People today do not want to be told what to believe. They may appear to listen politely but they probably will have switched off if we go on. And they won't ask again.

Gentleness and respect are key. 1 Pet 3:16 Many of us know the verse beforehand. Always be ready to give an answer for the hope within us. The way we give an answer is as important as the answer we give. People today are very intolerant of intolerance. We must not criticise other religions or beliefs even when we disagree.

Over this year we will be working primarily on two things. We want us all to have confidence in the gospel message. We also want that confidence to translate into respectful and successful outreach.

Providing for the physical and emotional needs of people has merit in its own right. We don't always have to have an agenda of notches on ones salvation belt. And yet, as we get to know people and they get to know us, as we grow to love them more, we will want them to know the Jesus we know something of. It is only in him that fullness of life is found.

It's funny how much of what we expect turns out to be entirely different. Even those who carry the vision find the outcome larger, broader, wider than they had envisaged.

About 9 years ago I visited a church, called St Ambrose, in the centre of Aranui, Christchurch. Previously the church had been dying. Sunday attendance as about 11.

Then people began to think outside the square. They checked out what their community needed. They began Ambrosia, a café.

And people came. Slowly. Ones and twos. They came with needs; a place to hang out, financial problems, family difficulties etc. The church began a foodbank, budget advice, social work and more people came – slowly. And people befriended them.

All good. As those things were happening the church had to examine its worship practices. They had to make changes. They took out all the pews. They turned the church side on to face a simple wooden Communion table. They rewrote the liturgy so that it reflected more accurately, the context in which the people lived.

And people came, to worship and they came to Christ. Slowly in their ones and twos.

The gospel of Jesus Christ doesn't change. The way we share it must change. We must listen much more, ask more questions. We must genuinely want to hear the answers, both from individuals and from our wider community.

And we must be prepared to change when people come. People are coming now; in their ones and twos. People have different needs to previous generations. We must be flexible so as not to put avoidable barriers in anyone's way.

We are beginning to change and to reach out in different ways. We really need the new building because we are struggling with what we have. But we thank God for what we do have. We have a building, pretty shabby now we have it. Lunch on the Hill is one example of how we are using what we have. Emerging ministries like Freshperspective and Budget Advice are other way our people are reaching out in Jesus' name.

In this parish we also have people. I love you very much. You are prepared to take risks; to change for the good of others who have great needs. I thank God for you all, for your heart for this community of Richmond in which God has placed us. Together we are moving onwards as we endeavour to hear what he is saying and what the community is saying.

We need your continued help.

- We need you to volunteer your time and energy in ways that fit with your God-given spiritual giftings and your passion.
- We need financial provision, both for existing ministry and for the new building so that our ministry can expand.
- We need your friendliness to come through so that when people do come to community ministries or to church, they are warmly welcomed and befriended.
- We need all of these things now, not just in the future.

Most of all we need your prayers.

Pray that we, and the other churches in this area, will respond to Jesus' call to come to him. Pray that we will genuinely shine the light of Christ in ways that can be seen, understood and received in this region. Pray that others will hear Jesus' call "Come to him."