

06 April 2025 Lent 5 A Reflection Rev Wayne Toleafoa

GOD'S EXTRAVAGANT LOVE

Readings: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

The Rev David Coleman from Eco-Churches, Church of Scotland, suggests that the common theme for today's readings is 'transformation'. He likens the life of the church and the life of individual Christians to the seasons of nature.

Although the cycle of the seasons is the same each year, each year we witness a brand-new cycle taking place. No two summers, and no two winters are the same. Each one is new. The Earth may look the same, but it is forever being renewed and transformed.

In our first reading, the writer of second Isaiah reminds the people of Israel of what God has done in the past. But urges them not to dwell on the past. Faith is not something static. Faith is dynamic. Like the cycle of nature, 'God is doing 'a new thing'', says Isaiah. Yes, Israel's liberation from Egypt was a defining moment for Israel. And yes, it's good to remember how the Red Sea swallowed up Pharaoh's chariots. Yes, it's good to remember how God provided food and water in the desert. Good to 'Celebrate the Passover'...

'But even more important, is to 'pay attention to the new thing(s) that God is doing today'.

Concentrate on your relationship to God 'today'. Look to the 'now'. How is your relationship to God – today? What new thing is God doing in your life today?

Most of us can look back to defining moments in our faith journey where our relationship with God was very strong: e.g. The day or the season, of our conversion, or the day of our Confirmation (when we made a public confession of our faith in God).

For some of us, conversion was sudden. For others of us, it was a process of osmosis where faith came more slowly and was absorbed over a long period of time.

We can look back to defining events which we might even describe as 'miraculous,' and we credit these fortuitous moments to God.

Last year we dedicated some time in the morning service to, 'God Moments'. People spoke of significant moments which strengthened their faith in God.

God moments that act as helpful reminders of what God has done for us in the past.

But 'how are we with God, today?' 'How is our relationship with God, today?'.

When we apply this question to the modern church: "How are we with God today?"

Many of us are old enough to remember when our churches were full. Our social lives as well as our religious lives, centred around the church. We remember the wonderful days of the church of the 1950s 60s and 70's.

Today we are witnessing a decline in the Western Church. What is the new thing God is doing, through that decline?

The temptation is to long for the good old days, when our focus should be on the present and the future.

Every week, we say, after our second reading: 'Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church' ...

What is God saying to us today ? Is our relationship with God still strong and healthy?

Our final two readings are also about Transformation.

The Spiritual transformation which comes about through devotion to Christ.

In St Paul's Letter to the church in Philippi, (Philippians 3:4b-14) Paul writes about his former life as a Pharisee, where he believed that strict obedience to the Mosaic Law was all that was needed, to be close to God.

Paul regarded himself as the 'perfect Pharisee', even persecuting those whom he saw as the enemies of God – including the followers of Jesus.

As we know, Paul's life was transformed by the experience of meeting the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus - on his way to persecute the Christians in Damascus.

Paul compared his old life to his new life in Christ:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him,...

'Knowing Christ, 'was all-important to Paul, everything else was rubbish.

It was that relationship with Christ that shaped the rest of Paul's life. He was transformed from self-righteous perfectionist and murderer of Christians – to becoming a church planter, a missionary, and the greatest apologist of the Christian Faith. Thirteen of the 'Epistles' in the New Testament are attributed to Paul. He still has a huge influence on the church today.

In our daily Christian walk, it is still our relationship with the Risen Christ that keeps our Faith alive and transforms our lives.

You can just imagine what Christian life would be like if it was just a matter of following the 10 commandments.

Without prayers and without conversations with God, without conversations with Christ in the Spirit, we would experience a very arid kind of Christianity. Like the Pharisaism that Paul escaped from.

It is from our worship life and our prayer life that we get the motivation and the inspiration to serve God and others. It is from our living relationship with God that our lives are enriched and transformed by the Spirit of God.

Our gospel reading was the beautiful Story of Mary of Bethany's devotion to Jesus.

Mary's story continues the theme of transformation, through devotion to Christ.

We know from an earlier story in the same gospel (John 11) that Jesus had raised Mary's brother Lazarus from the dead, symbolically showing Jesus' mastery over death.

A week or so later, Jesus returns to Bethany, to the home of Lazarus, Mary and Martha who are siblings. They put on a meal for Jesus, who is accompanied by some of his disciples, including Judas.

Mary performs her extravagant act of devotion by breaking open the expensive perfume and pouring it over Jesus' feet. Wiping his feet with her hair.

John's gospel tells us that Judas complained that the perfume should've been sold and the proceeds given to the poor.

John makes an ominous note about Judas. Judas said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

Jesus' answer to Judas' complaint was, 'Leave her alone. She bought it, so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

This wider picture, which we focus on during Lent and Easter, is not just about good book keeping. It is about the extravagant love of God towards us.

Jesus puts Mary's extravagant act in a wider context of his journey to the cross, and his burial in the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

There, from the cross and the tomb, Jesus will display the same power he displayed in the raising of Lazarus.

In his own resurrection he will show that life is stronger than death. Love is stronger than evil.

In reply to Judas' comment that the perfume should've been sold and the money given to the poor, Jesus said, Mary's act of devotion was the most important thing at that moment.

While giving money to the poor may be a good thing, giving them a vibrant faith - like the faith of Mary - is even more important .

PRAYER

Christ our Saviour

Too often,

we offer our love and our service

in carefully calculated small doses

instead of responding generously and spontaneously

with the fragrance of your love.

We are unwilling to bear

the cost of discipleship

because we underestimate the value

of who You are for us.

We find ourselves clinging to past glories

instead of straining forward

to the future You are bringing us.

Forgive us for these and all our failings

and grant us forgiveness of sins.

In Chrit's name, Amen.