

## July 18<sup>th</sup> Change is inevitable

The word *change* normally refers to new beginnings. But the mysterious process of transformation more often *happens not when something new begins, but when something old falls apart*. The pain of something old falling apart—chaos—invites the us to listen at a deeper level, and sometimes forces the us to ‘go deeper’, to a new place, to tease out the ‘new norm’. We don’t do this in the church very often. Most of us would never go to new places in any other way. Scripture and Christian writers use many words to describe this chaos: fire, dark night, death, emptiness, abandonment, trial, the Evil One. Whatever it is, it does not feel good and it does not feel like God.

We will normally do *anything* to keep the old thing from falling apart, yet this is when we need patience and guidance, and the *freedom to let go* instead of tightening our controls and certitudes. Perhaps Jesus is describing just this phenomenon when he says, “It is a narrow gate and a hard road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:14). Not accidentally, he mentions this narrow road right after teaching the Golden Rule. He knows how much letting go it takes to “treat others as you would like them to treat you” (Matthew 7:12).

While change can force a transformation, spiritual transformation always includes a disconcerting reorientation. It can either help people to find new meaning or it can force people to close down and slowly turn bitter. The difference is determined precisely by the quality of our inner life, our practices, and our spirituality. If our daily reflections during the time of Covid-19 have had a theme, it is to reflect on our collective experience with the bible, and to pray.

Change happens, but transformation is always a process of letting go, living in the confusing, shadowy space for a while. Eventually, like Jonah, we are spat up on a new and unexpected shore. You can see why Jonah in the belly of the whale is such an important symbol for many Jews and Christians. Mind you Jonah the groaner later told God off for his forgiving nature. “You are a loving God who loves to forgive. But I still don’t like the people of Ninevah and I wish they had been destroyed”. (The Lion Storyteller Bible).

In moments of insecurity and crisis, *shoulds* and *oughts* don’t really help. They just increase the shame, guilt, pressure, and likelihood of backsliding into unhealthy patterns. It’s the deep *yeses* that carry us through to the other side. It’s that deeper something we are strongly *for* —*such as the radical equality of our loving Father offered to each person, and the dignity for all found in Jesus Christ*— this allows us to wait out with God through this strange time.

God is someone in whom we believe, and God’s purposes are those we are fully commit to. In plain language, his compassion and goodness wins out over cynicism and giving grief, any day.

I’ve been doing webinars with other vicars lately. The three biggest struggles vicars are having right now are:

- Learning the art of digital services
- Putting in practice Covid-19 safeguards as we return to church
- Arranging holidays

Back in the 1967 it was said BCP Evening Prayer was killed off by the weeks and weeks of the Forsythe Saga on ITV.

The weeks of lockdown probably will have a similar effect on the Service of the Word.

If the Service of the Word can be done digitally, with more people watching at home than they did in church, why have it in church at all?

Has the same phenomenon happened with Communion Services? This I doubt. One cannot offer bread and wine on a laptop. The physical nature of the resurrection of Jesus Christ has to be experienced physically and live.

Has the same happened with music? I surmise change is on the way here. During lockdown we have sought church music in all sorts of places. Most of all we are seeking music and words which speaks to the moment. Jesus present and presence in the here and now. Finding hymns and songs which fit the here and now has challenged the 'back catalogue' of modernists and traditionalists hymns and songs. In the meanwhile we cannot sing in church...

The greatest change I suspect has come in how we view each other, and how we view creation. We have discovered how fragile we are, and how fragile nature is. In discovering this we have found life to be precious, our relationships are precious, and God is in his world.

There has been an openness to the Holy Spirit and a new trust in Jesus Christ.

We are less concerned with "doing Church" and more with "seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness and justice".

Whilst priests – now through the internet – hold the unity of things; in this time of Covid-19 we have seen a flowering of lay initiatives, with a particular focus on care for the local community, for fellow workers, whose efforts really matter; and a much more profound love and concern for our neighbours.

Peter is named "Rocky" by Jesus. Jesus founded his church on people of faith, people like Peter. Peter was also called the 'Son of Jonah' by Jesus.

Like Jonah, Peter does the right thing in the end. But like Jonah, Peter is prepared to question God. And eventually through Peter, like with Jonah and the people of Nineveh, God's forgiveness abounds.

I want to finish with Paul's prayer. We have discovered God's love abounding in all sorts of places during lockdown. Let us be led by God's spirit in this time of change. Let's look at what God is doing, and join in.

*<sup>16</sup>I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup>and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup>I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup>and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

20 Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup>to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

**God is working his purpose out**

Words: Arthur Campbell Ainger (1841-1919) Music: Millicent Kingham (1866-1927)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fb8tJF0HWM0>

**Prayer**      *from the Northumbria Community*

Christ, as a light  
illumine and guide me.  
Christ, as a shield  
overshadow me.  
Christ under me;  
Christ over me;  
Christ beside me  
on my left and my right.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Be in the heart of each to whom I speak;  
in the mouth of each who speaks unto me.  
This day be within and without me,  
lowly and meek, yet all-powerful.  
Christ as a light;  
Christ as a shield;  
Christ beside me  
on my left and my right.

**Funny story**

A dog was so clever that his owner sent him away to university.

Home for the holiday, the dog admitted he had learned neither history nor science, but added proudly, "I did make a good start in foreign languages."

"Okay," replied the dog's owner, "say something in a foreign language."

The dog said, "Meow!"