

22nd February, 2015.

Reading: Mark 1: 9 - 15

Sermon: We can't go on like this.

“We can't go on like this”. So begins Ken Ross' thoughts on our text for today, Ken Ross being the minister up the road from us. “We can't go on like this” is a phrase we use in our personal lives when we have reached the end of the road and know that something has to change. It's a phrase we use when something in our lives is detrimental to our sense of well-being and without putting too fine a point on it, sucking the life-blood out of us. It's a phrase which can be applied to many areas of life, both to our personal lives and to our world in general.

It's a phrase which is used by couples when their marriage has hit the rocks and they know that something drastic has to happen to make their future better. They either address the issues and find a way of moving forward or they part company. There comes a time, sadly, when they can no longer go on as they are.

It's a phrase which is used by couples who never see each other because of their work commitments and they realise in the end that something has to give. “We can't go on like this”, they will say to each other. They know that if their marriage is to survive, they have to think seriously about their priorities and about what changes they can make to improve their situation.

An addict who has sunk into the gutter and realises that the only thing ahead of him or her is death could express the same sentiment. “I can't go on like this. It's the end of the road. I need help to turn my life around”.

It's a phrase we could use when we look at the situation in Syria. “It can't go on like this”. The beheading of aid workers and people who are only doing their job, the indoctrination of young men and women, and even children, who are then used and abused by a system which cares nothing for them, the abduction of school girls for who knows what purpose - we don't even want to think about it - the shooting of innocent people because of their faith: “It can't go on like this”. Something has to give. A solution has to be found.

In Greece, the people have voiced the same words. With no electricity, no jobs, no money, no hope, they reached the same point before their election. “We can't go like this” and they voted for a

change of government, not that things are working out as they had hoped.

The situation in Ukraine is such that, deep down, both sides know they can't go on as they are doing. Something dramatic has to happen to prevent the destruction of lives and homes and livelihoods and the very fragile cease fire is a first step towards achieving this.

As Ken Ross says, there comes a time when we realise that unhealthy influences on our lives and poisonous patterns of behaviour need to change. We realise that "we can't go on like this".

When people are desperate and they hear that a new opportunity is presenting itself, a new start, they can become interested in vast numbers. As Ken says, such seems to have been the mood among many people at the time that Jesus began His public ministry and he bases that opinion on the fact that many flocked to hear the preaching of John the Baptist out in the desert.

John was calling for radical change, for repentance. Not only was he calling for a change of direction but he was doing something which had never happened before in Jewish history. He was calling on people to confess their sins and to be baptised and that caught the attention of the people.

In the Jewish tradition, baptism was something for Gentiles, for those from outside the Jewish community who had been attracted to it and who wanted to become part of it.

For the chosen people themselves, there was no question of needing to be baptised, not until John the Baptist appeared on the scene. As a statement of the radical change for which he was calling, he invited the Jewish people themselves to be baptised and as Ken says, the surprise was, that many of them were up for it.

We hold back from making radical changes because we think such changes will offend people or will chase people away when in actual fact, the radical changes can actually attract interest. In the modern day, the Cafe Church is one such radical move away from traditional worship. We might hold up our hands in horror at the thought of sitting around tables drinking tea or coffee while the sermon takes place but when the crowds flocked to see Jesus and to hear what he was saying, they didn't come to sit on pews. Pews are simply our tradition and maybe we need to make radical changes to inject new life into our worship and into our lives and the lives of other people.

It was in a climate of change that Jesus began His public ministry but the first thing He did was identify with the people He came to save.

He embraced the radical change that John was promoting and as a Jew, He offered Himself for baptism. As He did so, God's response was: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." and the dove, the Spirit of God, descended upon Him.

Ken Ross points out that our modern culture has made us wary of the supernatural and yet we know that there is a spiritual dimension to life. We seek, so often, to rationalise things and that has stood us in good stead in many areas of life. Even in our spiritual lives, our faith can be strengthened by an intellectual approach but our intellect has limits and we need to be humble enough to recognise that and to open ourselves up to the breath of the Spirit of God, the thing that we cannot explain or rationalise, the supernatural, if you want to put it that way.

That is what Jesus did, and after the high point of His baptism, He was driven out into the wilderness where He embraced His destiny. The time, His time, had come. The reign of God was about to break into human life in a new and exciting way and as Ken says, only by following the journey of Easter, Jesus' journey towards death and resurrection, can we discover what that is all about.

Ken Ross suggests that we need to find our own wilderness so that we know how to respond to our calling. Most of our day, every day, is packed with so many demands and distractions, that we are left with no space to reflect on the purpose of God for our lives.

Some people use Lent as an opportunity to rid themselves of some of the distractions so that they can think clearly and reassess their values and their purpose and their direction in life.

I was speaking to a minister the other day who has moved his television into a spare room for Lent to avoid the distraction that it offers. He has also given up alcohol and chocolate biscuits but I think that might have been for other reasons! His hope is that the time he has free, because the television is unavailable, will be devoted to reading and to reflection.

Lent offers us the opportunity, if we accept it, to look at our lives to see if there are any areas where we could apply the words: "I can't go on like this."

Are there any areas in our lives which need to be radical transformed so that our spiritual lives can deepen and so that our faith can be strengthened? Are there any areas of our lives which drag us down rather than enriching our lives and our experience of life, areas which we need to tackle head on?

Is there something we could do which would allow us to refocus our thoughts and reconsider our priorities so that our attention is clearly focused on God and on God's purpose for our lives?

When I was looking at the Church Review on Friday, in between fits of coughing, it threw up so many challenges to us as a congregation.

Here are some examples:

- Tell us how you plan to explore and develop new Worship initiatives. That assumes change. It assumes that we are looking at new ways of doing things. It assumes a move away from the traditional hymn/prayer sandwich.
- Tell us how you plan to explore and develop new Evangelism initiatives. Again it assumes change but it also assumes that we intend doing outreach.
- Tell us how you plan to explore and develop new Discipleship initiatives. Jesus' command to His disciples was to go and make disciples. This request for information assumes we are reaching out but challenges us to look at new ways of doing things. There is no room in this review for the phrase: But this is how we've always done it. It assumes a change to what we do at present. We can't go on like this.
- Tell us how you plan to explore and develop new Fellowship initiatives. Again it assumes change and the building of good relationships with each other.
- Tell us how you plan to explore and develop your relationship with the wider Church. We're not meant to exist as an island. We are meant to interact with other Christians and to look at new ways of doing that. It assumes a relationship with the wider Church which we can strengthen.

At no point do those requests state that we cannot continue doing what is already in place but they do assume variety and radical change which is what gave life and impetus to Jesus' ministry.

The review asks more of us.

- Tell us how you plan to explore and develop new ways to equip your ministry team and encourage more people to take up leadership roles. My first thought was that we didn't have a ministry team. We certainly don't function as a ministry team but we do have people who share in the ministry through the leading of prayers, through the reading of Scripture, through sharing their experiences, through

involvement in Messy Church, through the leading of groups. How are we going to equip those people and encourage new people to take on leadership roles?

The review also asks about the promotion of stewardship, about how we will sustain and improve communication, about how we plan to explore and develop new initiatives to maintain and enhance our buildings so that they better support the delivery of our mission and vision.

There are just one or two things to consider and we have six months to do it. No pressure. However, what is clear from the review is that we cannot go on as we are. Things have to change and that can be a painful process but then so is stagnation. However, things which stagnate die.

Our faith, our Church, is about life and about life coming out of death. Jesus rose for the dead and through the Spirit, breathes new life into each one of us and into our ministry.

This is the beginning of Lent, the beginning of our journey towards the Cross and as we move through these next weeks, I would encourage each of us to take time to review our priorities, so that together we might move forward in the knowledge of God's purpose for our lives.