

Monday of Holy Week 2020 - Church is changing – James Morgan

Well, when Anna asked me if I would be prepared to give a homily in holy week I thought I would need to do some preparation. I didn't think this would involve getting ready to deliver a homily from my study online, using some technology that I'd never then heard of, never mind used, to an audience that I could see but not hear! But there we go – as the message from the leadership of the Church of England for these challenging times goes, 'church is changing'.

Both of our readings today discuss the concept of change in the church. Paul's letter to the Hebrews describes how the new covenant between God and the people superseded the old covenant that the people of Israel had well and truly broken. In case anyone got a bit lost amongst the details of animal sacrifices required for redemption under the old covenant (as a lifelong vegetarian, it took me a few goes to get through this passage), the main message was that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross completely changed the paradigm, making the old covenant 'obsolete'. A massive change to the culture of the day, and also quite fortunate for my sensitivities, and no doubt, for several animals. In its place he formed a new, 'better covenant' through his own sacrifice' made once by Jesus on the cross for the forgiveness of all our sins. This marked an end to centuries of established practices. So we can see here that for the readers of Paul's letter, church is changing.

Our gospel reading is perhaps a bit easier going on the narrative, but all the more challenging in its message. I've heard it described by better informed preachers than myself, but the basic synopsis is this. The religious authorities had set up several systems for exploiting the poor on their own doorstep. Firstly, the people were required to sacrifice animals (and it's doves this time – so two out of two for making the vegetarians and animal lovers amongst us uncomfortable!), but the people were only allowed to sacrifice those animals that were considered pure enough by the religious authorities which, oddly enough, were those animals being sold by merchants who charged inflated prices and paid the religious authorities their cut of the profits. And secondly, the taxes due to the temple could only be paid in the temple's specified coinage, so money changers were allowed by the temple to exchange the people's ordinary coinage at an inflated rate which... ensured that the temple authorities got their cut of the profits. So we have a set of corrupt money changers and animal traders, bankrolling the senior figures in the church. Jesus, quite understandably, was not impressed with this and threw the lot of them out, challenging the church authorities by doing so. Once again, church is changing.

To us, a modern twenty-first century audience, those changes probably seem quite reasonable, if not long overdue, but to those to whom Paul was writing, and to the religious authorities of Jesus' day, they were being instructed to abandon long-held ways of doing things that would have been familiar to them, which would have been seen as 'the way things are done'. Now, I'm not suggesting that there are any direct theological parallels here between the changes Paul's followers, and those in the temple were asked to make and all the changes we have had to deal with recently. There aren't. But thanks to our recent experiences, I think we can perhaps empathise with those in today's lessons who's understanding of the world around them was really challenged by the changes Jesus brought about. The uncomfortableness of it all, with the tentative steps towards something different, and with the sometimes overwhelming uncertainty of where they fit into this new scene that they hadn't expected, and didn't necessarily want. Comfort blankets have definitely been thrown off and torn apart and all of a sudden we, like them, have to adapt to change at a rapid pace. Yet again, church is changing.

But all the same, Lent is a time for reflection on how we do things, and much as Lent has been disrupted this year, its purpose is one thing that hasn't changed. Leaving aside the terrible spread of coronavirus – there are no doubt better qualified, more experienced preachers who can address that subject - many of us have had more time on our hands than normal during Lent for reflection and prayer. And perhaps, as a counter to all the bad news, we can harness the changes we have had to make, to create something new and worthwhile in our own worship practices, both personal and as a church. The very fact of the existence of Christianity today demonstrates that the changes in our readings stuck, but it wasn't an easy or a comfortable path, and we'll hear more over the rest of the week about the challenges faced by the earliest Christians. Perhaps, through our response to the changes that have been forced on us by circumstance, we have already made a start to doing something really worthwhile, such as this style of worship that extends beyond our church building. Perhaps that can evolve beyond being a stopgap measure into something with the ability to reach wider audiences than we would ever have achieved from our traditional worship. Again, I don't want to draw parallels too far - this isn't to say that there is anything fundamentally wrong with our traditional style of worship as there was in the temple. Indeed, having recently taken up a new job in the finance function of the church, I can confirm first hand that at least in the diocese of Durham we are not conducting any dubious lending practices or dodgy animal trading deals! But having all this change forced upon us does perhaps raise some answers to the question of 'what if we did things differently', for example we did more online' that many churches have placed in the 'too difficult' category for years. If nothing else, the last few weeks demonstrate the possibilities. Can we find the boldness and vision to explore and develop them? Maybe church is changing again.

Perhaps more importantly though, will we reflect on what our response to the crisis tells us about ourselves and how our faith influences how we see our society. There are several new stereotypes for us to consider. Are we like the selfless key workers sacrificing their own safety for the benefit of others, or the responsible citizens staying at home to protect the NHS, or are there elements of the panic buyers and exploitative employers looking out only for themselves? The parable of the rich man building his big barns comes to mind but I'll leave for another time. But all of a sudden society begins to value those who look after others above those who look after themselves. Will that last? Who knows. In a period when church buildings are sadly empty, the church is, more than ever, made of its people. And the uncertainty and confusion in this time of crisis can sometimes bring out the best and the worst in us – saintly self-sacrifice yes, but also fear and frustration leading to frayed tempers and thoughtless actions. The Lenten period of self-denial and self-awareness may be all the more useful this year to help us see what we do as Jesus would have done. If the church is its people, maybe the church is changing.

I think that's enough from me – but how better to finish than with the words of the 'prophet' himself...

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is
Rapidly fading.
And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changin'.