

God and newness

Psalm 98; Act 10:44-48

One of my favourite cartoons from Private Eye, many years ago now, is of two ancient Israelites sitting under a palm tree. In the distance you can see a young man rushing towards them, with his harp in his hand. "Oh no," said one of the ancient Israelites, "here comes King David, with *another* of his new songs."

How do we cope with novelty and innovation, in worship, politics, fashion, what we eat and drink. I always thought the first person watching a chicken lay an egg and say, "Yes, I'm going to eat that", was a trailblazer for embracing the new, and courage. I am reminded of a quote from Albert Einstein who said, "A person who never made a mistake never tried anything new."

There are some people who are almost genetically predisposed to trying new things. Artists, musicians, scientists, cooks, writers, designers, engineers – always on the look-out for that something a little bit different, or a lot different, which might just be the thing to bring about a difference in the way the world is and the way we live our lives in that world. Often it starts with the desire to overcome a problem, or an unfairness. It can start with the observation, "We can't go on like this", or, "there must be a better way to do this", or, "I wonder what happens when...?" In the days after Easter, recorded by Luke in his Book of the Acts of the Apostles, in and around Jerusalem and the coastal towns and cities of Roman Palestine, the followers of Jesus were travelling. Last week Philip was on the road to Gaza. This week we read about Peter travelling from Jerusalem to Joppa, and then on to the home of the Roman Centurion Cornelius at Caesarea. But the message that God is doing a new thing continues. Another prominent non-Jew, and his whole household, were blessed by God's Spirit in front of the astonished friends of Peter, and another baptism takes place. Yet again, something new had taken place, and it would shake Judaism, as indeed it would shake the world of faith.

What do we do when the Spirit of God does a new thing, and, in the words of Psalm 98 teaches the world of faith to, "sing to the Lord a new song, for He has done marvellous things?" The Holy

Spirit can be disruptive. A church historian writes that “the church must be organized to do two things:

- To pass on the tradition from one generation to another
- To be open to the winds of the Holy Spirit by which the tradition comes alive in each generation.”ⁱ

I think that’s the key. Tradition needs to come alive in each generation. New eyes on old realities. New understanding of old practices. New interpretation of old truths. And that isn’t easy. But it is necessary. And it is what we read about in the Book of Acts. *Can* you imagine the shock amongst the Jewish Christians? Ethiopian eunuch – baptised. Roman centurion, and his entire family – baptised. The Spirit of God on the move and overrunning the carefully set boundaries and barriers that were put in place to keep things safe, and familiar, and controllable.

“Ours is a world full of boundaries: No-trespassing signs warn the uninvited to stay out. A floating rope across the shallow and deep sections of a swimming pool. Lines painted on a gym floor delineate the playing area from ‘out of bounds.’ Railroad tracks divide one part of town from ‘the other side of the tracks.’ Mighty, rivers, mountain ranges, or even carefully negotiated invisible borders partition the land into nations. From fenced (gardens) to fenced borders, our boundaries seek to keep the insiders in and the outsiders out.”ⁱⁱ

We might struggle with this fluid, transforming, reshaping activity, but God does not. When things seem too settled, or we have taken too much for granted, or life has become a little stale, or people have become complacent, or something needs to change because we cannot go back to the way we were, and we cannot go on the way we did, God finds a way. God comes with newness.

Sometimes when we least want it, because life is hard enough, because everything is up in the air, the Spirit of God infiltrates life. During World War Two cultural leaders like T. S. Eliot and Dorothy L Sayers met for the Malvern Conference to reimagine British Society. William Beveridge published his famous report in 1942 which identified five giants on the road to post-war reconstruction – Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. 1942, when victory was not secure in the war, but the Spirit of God was moving beyond to look to a better, different world.

Rab Butler passed the Education Act. In England Archbishop William Temple wrote his *Christianity and the Social Order*, and here in Scotland John Baillie in 1946, who incidentally spent his childhood in Braidburn Crescent, a few doors down from my manse, wrote his report, *'God's Will for Church and Nation'*, giving a Christian view of where our country, and our world, with the Church, should be going as we emerged from the cataclysm of war.

In other words, the foundations of the society that has shaped the UK ever since were laid during the doldrums of war. This is telling us that the post-pandemic renewal for which we pray will be furnished by the ideas that coalesced during this troubled period we've been going through.ⁱⁱⁱ

God's Spirit moved then, to remake and reshape our world, and our Church, and I can't help but feel God's Spirit is on the move again.

This God of newness is in the Church now, just as God was in the early Church of Roman Palestine. God's Spirit is on the move again, and things are shifting. As we learn to use this building in different ways. As we continue to reach out with imagination to our community. As we determine to minister to the vulnerable, and support those inside and outside our membership because it is the right thing to do. As we do things that fifty years ago, twenty years ago, would have been unimaginable, so the real hero of our Church, the gracious and prompting and prodding Spirit of God keeps nudging us onward.

The early Christians perspective about who was 'in' and who was 'out' was being changed not by their own doing, but by the God devoted to newness. God showed no partiality then; nor should we now. In this little story from Acts told in a few verses, we see something of the extravagance of the Holy Spirit, and the wideness, and wildness of God's grace. No more 'them and us', only 'us'. In our church, in our city, in our country, in our world, can we see the new thing that God sees? A community of people that embraces people just as they are, women and men, young and old, poor and wealthy, gay and straight, unionist and nationalist, Hibs supporter and Hearts supporter, people from Edinburgh and people from Glasgow, people from **both** sides of Comiston Road!

None of us can easily handle newness on our own. But with the outpouring of God's Spirit, we will find ourselves propelled along by the witness of the change Jesus' resurrection makes in all

of us when we give ourselves, in faith, to Him. Not easy, not without struggle, but possible. Sometimes the Holy Spirit finds it hard to find a crack in the way we go about our church life, and our political life, and our life in general. "Sometimes the Holy Spirit has a hard time getting through our stubborn desire to stay the way we are."^{iv} But somehow the Spirit does.

What is the God of newness saying to us, saying to you, saying to me today? What thresholds are we being led to, and what boundaries are we being prompted to cross? Terrifying. Exhilarating. Necessary. Faithful. For Peter and Cornelius, in Caesarea. And for us, today, now.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Rosemary Radford Ruether in Barbara K Lundblad, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2*, p481

ⁱⁱ Jeffrey D Peterson Davis, *ibid*, p478

ⁱⁱⁱ Sam Wells, St Martin in the Fields Newsletter, 30th April 2021

^{iv} Barbara K Lundblad, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2* p483