

Sunday January 24th 2021 – Rev Colin Bradford – Embracing Change: trusting Christ

Two weeks ago, we released Rev Geoff Dornan from his pastoral responsibilities for our congregation and Presbytery. In farewelling Geoff and Gilda, we have entered a liminal space. We are between one thing and the next. We do not know how long we will be here – waiting, searching, anticipating something new.

During this time, in this liminal space, commencing in February, Rev Trevor Lunney will be a supply Minister leading worship and providing pastoral care. As I understand the arrangement, he will be part time and therefore is limited in what he can provide. Trevor does not come as a change agent. In the first instance, this will be Church Council's responsibility.

Our Church Council with assistance and guidance from the Sydney Central Coast Presbytery will lead us through a process of discerning future directions, including but not limited to the calling of another Minister. This will not be easy, and some difficult decisions may have to be made. We have been warned by our Treasurer over the last few years that our financial commitments have not been sustainable over the longer term. And as we all know, the loss of income last year from Garage Sales, concerts and some rental income has exacerbated the problem.

We can be sure that changes will occur. The question is: how do we respond to the changes? How do we encourage and support our leaders through this process? How will we care for one another in this process? Sometimes significant change can cause us to experience grief when the change at first seems like loss. How will we stand alongside those who may feel grief as we let go some familiar and treasured aspects of our life together?

In the story of Jonah, we see a counter example of embracing change, trusting Christ. While the story is not historical in any sense, we can read it as a parable and find deep truth within it.

Jonah is called by the Lord, to go to Nineveh and warn the citizens that devastation is coming. Nineveh in ancient Assyria, according to Wikipedia, was the largest city in the world for about fifty years up to 632 BCE when civil war destroyed it. The story, although written much later, was probably set in that context.

Jonah was afraid of the Assyrians, a powerful empire that conquered Israel, and so he set off by ship in the opposite direction. A huge storm on the Mediterranean Sea is calmed by throwing the hapless Jonah overboard. As he sinks under the water, a large fish swallows him, and he prays to the Lord for forgiveness and mercy. After 3 days, the fish spews him on to a beach.

Again, the Lord calls Jonah to go to Nineveh with the dire message of imminent disaster. Having learnt his lesson, he goes to Nineveh walking throughout the city for three days proclaiming the bad news. All the people of Nineveh, and the king, responded with a complete change of heart.

Jonah then leaves the city and sits on a hill overlooking the city waiting for the disaster to hit. When nothing happens and he realises that the Lord has been merciful to the people of Nineveh, Jonah is angry with the Lord and complains. No doubt, he feels like a bit of a goose, because his predictions of disaster were not fulfilled. Israel's enemies and oppressors were let off the hook.

The Lord shows mercy and graciousness to Jonah by causing a bush to grow, protecting him from the heat of the day, as he continues to sit in his anger. But overnight the bush dies, and again he expresses his anger against God, saying he is "angry enough to die". The story finishes with the Lord saying to Jonah, "You are concerned about the bush, for which you did not labour and which you did not grow; it came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who do not know their right had from their left, and also many animals?"

Jonah could not bear the thought of God being loving, merciful and compassionate to those he viewed as enemies. And so he resisted God's change of heart, and suffered in his own self-pity. And yet God's love for Jonah was steadfast, and likewise God's love was for the people and animals of Nineveh. Does it surprise us that God's love is for all people and animals, the good and the bad?

In the Gospel passage, we hear a quite different response to change. Jesus, who had been baptised by John, was becoming aware of God's special calling to proclaim the good news, that the "kingdom of God has come near". He invites all who listen to metanoie, literally "change of mind", and to put their trust in this "kingdom of God". Unfortunately, when St. Jerome, in the 4th century, translated the Greek text into Latin, he used the word *paenitentia*, which means repent or do penance. But Jesus was asking more of his disciples than adopting a more moral way of life. Instead, Jesus was asking would-be disciples to adopt a whole new world view, a total change of heart and mind.

The four disciples, Andrew, Peter, James and John clearly made a radical change in their priorities. They left behind family and careers – and as Mark's story unfolds the inner process of change in the disciples is a struggle that continues even beyond the death and resurrection of Jesus. In embracing the change, and trusting in Christ, they witnessed to the eternal love of that same Lord God, who loved Jonah as well as the people and animals of Nineveh.

In the first chapter of Mark's Gospel, we read of Jesus healing and, in the process, disregarding religious regulations regarding Sabbath and ritual cleanliness, for the sake of compassion. He does not ask those he heals to worship him or make any sort of commitment. We also learn, in this first chapter, that his first priority in the early morning is to find a solitary place to pray. This is what he teaches his disciples: faith is about loving ourselves and loving others because of God's love for us. And we learn of God's love for us through deep prayer.

I feel hopeful that we will come through this liminal space and time as we came through the months of lock down by caring for one another. Now that we are meeting in person again, it may be easier to maintain that sense of belonging.

Just as important, or maybe more important, is to be aware of God's love for us, to know that whatever we might think of ourselves, or whatever others might think of us, God loves us. This is made clear in the story of Jonah, where God is concerned for the people and animals of Nineveh (much to Jonah's surprise and disgust) and God is concerned for Jonah, despite his negative attitude. To really know that love of God will enable us to embrace change, even change for the worse. So perhaps, what we each need to do, during this liminal time, is find ways of encouraging one another to recognise God's love for each of us, and indeed for all of creation. Love is stronger than regulations!!

And God loves those Indigenous Australians who, because of their sense of loss and grief, call Australia Day "Invasion" Day or see it as a "Day of Mourning".