

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-2,16-21 1 Peter 2:4-12

Sermon - God's New Thing

During the Second World War, as you know, Germany occupied some of the Channel Islands. On one is a Methodist Church which stopped gathering for worship when the occupation began. When the church was opened for worship 5 years later, the hymn numbers were still on the board as they tend to be in Methodist Churches until the next service. One of them was this short hymn:

*This, this is the God we adore, our faithful unchangeable friend;
Whose love is as great as His power, and neither knows measure nor end.*

*'Tis Jesus the first and the last, whose Spirit shall guide us safe home;
We'll praise Him for all that is past, and trust Him for all that's to come.*

At the re-opening of that church this same hymn was sung. And very appropriate it was. And equally, I think, for us today. God is our 'faithful, unchangeable friend'. He has carried us through the difficult times of past months and brought us to this point. As the Lord Himself said through Isaiah, 'Even though you go through deep waters, they will not overwhelm you and even though you go through fire you will not be burnt.' So, we do 'praise Him for all that is past and trust Him for all that's to come.' Jesus is 'the first and the last'; He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. And as we start a new chapter in the life of our Church, we can be assured of His presence with us and His guidance as we seek His direction for the future.

In the second part of the Isaiah reading the Lord says, 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.' This probably refers to the past failure of the Israelites that resulted in their exile in Babylon – their failure to follow the Lord's commandments to them. But that is now in the past, says the Lord. They have 'done their time' so to speak. Forget the former things; don't dwell on the past. As we make a new start and seek to establish a 'new normal', are their things that we need to forget; that we need to leave in the past?

This pandemic has helped us to reassess what is really important in life and what is not. The deaths of so many highlight the fact that life is fragile and unpredictable. Who would have thought, as we met for worship on 15th March, that it would be 6 months before we would be able to gather again? The future is uncertain; nothing can be guaranteed. Covid has reminded us to appreciate those close to us while we can. It has reminded us of the importance of community life and the need to care for our neighbours.

Are there things we maybe need to leave behind in order to make time for those things which are more important and lasting? Or if not leave behind completely, maybe prune down, to free up time for other things.

Lockdown has also influenced some of our spending patterns. Maybe we have discovered that we have saved some money on certain luxuries that we haven't been able to exercise, like eating out. Could we maybe reassess our spending patterns and so free up more money to assist the many needs in the world.

God's message through Isaiah then moves on to the future, which is the focus of this passage. 'I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up, do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people, that they may proclaim my praise.' The reference here is to the return of the Jews from captivity back to their homeland. God will make a way for them through the desert; He will provide water for them to drink. But notice what this is all leading up to. I will do this, God says, 'so that they may proclaim my praise.'

The people of Judah had been in a foreign land, and as the psalmist wrote and as Boney M sang, 'By the rivers of Babylon we hung up our harps and we wept. For how can you sing the Lord's song in a strange land.' But here the Lord says He will bring them back 'so that they may proclaim His praise'. We have been in exile in a sense; we have been in a 'strange land'. And now the Lord is bringing us back together. Why? So that we may sing His praise.'

If there is one thing I would like us to develop in our 'new normal' as a congregation, it would be this aspect of worship.' In the passage in 1 Peter we read, 'You, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual temple, to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices to God.' 'You are being built into a spiritual temple...' What is the purpose of a temple? It is for the worship of God. We are joined together, built into a spiritual temple to worship God. To offer, not physical sacrifices, like the priests of old, but spiritual sacrifices, spiritual offerings of praise and worship. 'Later in that passage Peter continues, 'You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light'. We are a 'people belonging to God...' For what purpose?' So that we may declare the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His wonderful light'.

But to be able to offer worship together, we need to be offering worship on our own first. If we are not meeting with God individually in times of devotion, our worship together will be affected. The Methodist Church across Britain is calling us in this new church year to focus ourselves anew on our private prayer and worship. With your membership card which you will receive in the next few weeks, there will be another one which sets out what is called 'A Methodist Way of Life'. It invites us to commit ourselves anew to four important aspects of our faith. The first is worship – on our own and together. Something else the Methodist Church is doing is to host a nationwide Zoom prayer meeting every Tuesday at 12.45 for 15 minutes. I joined the first one this past week.

I believe God wants to do a new thing in us and through us. But for that to happen He needs us as individuals and as a church to be willing and waiting and connected to Him through our worship and devotion. In recent weeks I have been getting up half-an-hour earlier in order to have a more adequate time with the Lord. Will you join me in seeking to enhance our worship individually and corporately. It may be through having more time in your devotions or it may be something else, but whatever it is, may it help us to be ready for any new thing that God wants to do in us and through us.

‘Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See I am doing a new thing... I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland, to give drink to my people... that they may proclaim my praise’. ‘For you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light’.