

See I am doing a new thing - Jonathan Thomas

Isaiah 43.16-21

Do you like new technology? Are you waiting for the latest Apple iPhone? Are you looking forward to a bigger, flatter, clearer smart TV with internet connection so you can watch this online service on the biggest screen possible? Are you in love with your new revolutionary Dyson vacuum cleaner? Each provides you with a new quicker, easier, better, more efficient way of doing something.

Or do you dread being told by your child or grandchild to get a new phone or TV or vacuum cleaner when you have only just got used to how the current one works, and you preferred the one before that which was simpler!

We all react differently to new things: either with excited anticipation of change, improvement and novelty or with dread of the comfortable familiar disappearing and having to exert ourselves with adjusting to the new, or a mix of both.

Our current sermon series title, 'The new normal' reflects a phrase that has been in use for many months now as the world thinks about life post-pandemic. I wonder what reaction the phrase stirs up in you? Excitement, fear, uncertainty? We heard some hopes for the future in our opening activity that relate to this new normal. I'm sure many would like everything to go back to how things were before we ever heard of COVID-19. Others undoubtedly would like to forge ahead into a new future where we can put into practice lessons from the effects of the pandemic to make the world a better place.

I'm sure these thoughts were in the minds of the Jewish exiles in Babylon as they heard from their prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Zechariah and Haggai who spoke of God returning them to their homeland. Last week we heard how Jeremiah gave encouragement to these exiles that for the duration of their time in Babylon they should settle down, enjoy life there, be a blessing to the people around them. But now those years of being in the midst of the crisis of exile are coming to an end and God is stirring things up. As we heard 2 weeks ago from Mick Isaiah prophecies that God will use the heathen Persian King Cyrus to bring about his purposes to restore the Jews in exile to their homeland.

And in today's reading from Isaiah 43 God is preparing them for this latest exodus by using imagery from the first exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land.

¹⁶ This is what the LORD says –

he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters,

¹⁷ who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there, never to rise again, extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:"

God grabs their attention to listen to his words through Isaiah by referring to his miraculous deeds for the Israelites 1000 years earlier when he parted the Red Sea to rescue them from the pursuing Egyptians. This event is the major miraculous event in Israel's history recalled many times throughout the Old Testament, such as in Psalm 77, to remind the Israelites of God's power to rescue them and his favour upon them. Remembering how

we came to faith or when God has spoken to us or miracles he has done in our life as Marsha spoke about last week similarly strengthens our faith in times of trouble or doubt.

But then God dramatically says in v18 “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past”, before preparing them for their future by saying in v19 “See, I am doing a new thing”.

Despite the fact that the past glories of God have often sustained them God is telling his people in exile not to dwell on that past, not to live on the wonderful stories of yesteryear, but to be prepared for a new thing that he will do, a second exodus, this time from Babylon back to the Holy Land. The past can teach and illustrate, but must not limit or bind. God is revealed in the past, but is more than the past revealed. He always has new good things in store.

And what a thing it will be. Like dry riverbeds in the hot, barren wilderness being filled with refreshing life-giving water, God will bring forth new life and hope from a dry and hopeless place. Like wild animals honouring God so will unlikely people, far from God, honour him through their actions.

And he does this because as v20-21 says he loves them, they are his chosen people, his children, and he wants to give them hope and a good future. But ultimately he wants his people, his children to proclaim his praise.

However, he recognises that they might miss this new thing, this upcoming return from exile as a new work of God – “Do you not perceive it?” – v19. This prophecy is there to prepare them so that they won’t miss this as God’s great work for them his chosen people. They have not been forgotten, God has great things in store, they should be expectant! But the emphasis on a ‘new thing’ prepares them for something different, not a return to their old ways back in their former land. They need a new mindset, a new way of thinking and being, a ‘new normal’.

Jesus’ little parable in Luke 5 of garments and wineskins says something similar. You don’t tear a new garment in order to use it as a patch for an old one, that’s a waste and won’t work. Similarly you don’t put new wine that is fermenting into an old wineskin that has lost its elasticity or it will burst – everyone knows that (or at least they did back then!). In other words a new work of God, as Jesus was bringing in through his life and teachings, requires a new mindset, an openness to change which sadly the Jewish leaders in Jesus’ day were not prepared to accept.

This has so many parallels for us as we enter a ‘new normal’ post-COVID. Parallels individually, as churches, as a global community. Alexander White said that the Christian life was a ‘series of new beginnings’. It starts with our salvation and rebirth, but doesn’t stop there. God is always doing a ‘new thing’, because he is active, creative, adaptive.

That may excite us or terrify us just as new technology does, but it is a fact of being a Christian and particularly so now. So what might it mean for our global community, our churches and ourselves?

For our global community we are recognising that we need to support poorer nations with the vaccination programs because the effects of COVID in other countries affect us too. And I think there are signs of a desire for equity that will stretch beyond vaccinations, to provide

greater financial support to reduce poverty and improve health care and quality of life in poorer nations as well as tackle climate change for the good of all nations. There is a long way to go, but I think God is stirring things up and we should pray.

For us as churches in this parish I think God is saying a few new things for us in this season post-pandemic:

- We need to focus on Him, trust in Him, pray to Him rather than focus and rely on services, activities and events
- We need to be braver in sharing our faith, individually and corporately
- We need to be more open to change, to spontaneity
- We need to share the load and not rely on certain people to do so much

As you will see in N&N we are bringing in a new service pattern in September for a number of reasons which we believe is responding to what God is doing amongst us at present. We will also be dropping some of our regular pre-COVID activities, adapting others and starting a few new ones as well as keeping much the same. These changes some of you may find hard, you may miss aspects of what was there before, but let's pray that God uses this 'new normal', which we have prayed about and sought God about for his glory and be supportive of them. And let's be open to what other new things God might want to do amongst us that we are not aware of yet!

And individually what might God be saying to you? What new thing might he want to do in you or through you? For me God is telling me to be braver, more courageous, something I have often struggled with. What about you? Take time to listen to God, to reflect on what he might have been saying to you through the pandemic. How can you better love your family and friends, your world, your church, yourself and keep these all in balance?

While I was preparing this I received an email from Mick Moorse who read Isaiah 43 for our online service today. He felt God saying to us words from 2 Kings 3:16-17: "Dig ditches", because God is going to send rain and we need those ditches to catch the rain rather than let it soak away. In other words how are we preparing ourselves and our churches for this new thing that God is doing? Are our hearts ready, are our lifestyles open to change, are we prepared to adapt to the 'new normal'? God is speaking afresh to us today through Isaiah to help us be ready and to perceive these wonderful new things that he is doing. Let's be open, ready, adaptable and expectant and pray 'Come Holy Spirit, do a new thing in me'.
AMEN