

Matthew 10: 32-42

“Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But everyone who denies me here on earth, I will also deny before my Father in heaven. “Don’t imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! I came not to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Your enemies will be right in your own household!”

“If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it.

“Anyone who receives you receives me, and anyone who receives me receives the Father who sent me. If you receive a prophet as one who speaks for God, you will be given the same reward as a prophet. And if you receive righteous people because of their righteousness, you will be given a reward like theirs. And if you give even a cup of cold water to one of the least of my followers, you will surely be rewarded.”

A sermon for 28th June 2020; the Third Sunday of Trinity

Change! How do you react when you read that word? With a shudder, and a cold feeling in the pit of your stomach? With excitement and anticipation for what that change might be? With indifference at something that doesn’t have to affect you?

Of course these are exaggerations of just some of the feelings we will have towards change, and you may react in a completely different way.

We have seen a lot of change in the past few months, haven’t we? Many changes have been unpleasant, and have been endured rather than enjoyed, and we will be glad to see these changes not take root in our communities; restrictions on movement and being unable to see friends and family. But there have also been changes that have been life-giving to many, and are things we would hope to continue in the future; neighbours getting to know one another and helping one another, the chance for some parents to spend more time with children, and the value we have placed on some of the keyworkers in our society.

There have been changes too in our worship and spiritual disciplines; how many of you have received this through the post, or have downloaded it from the website, rather than hearing it delivered from a pulpit? I have received comments that people are now reading sermons several times in a week, are learning to pray for themselves, and are sharing the resources with family members who had not previously attended church.

One of the changes I am experiencing is that of saying Morning Prayer each weekday, not in the Lady Chapel of Holy Trinity, but over Zoom. We have seen an increase in the congregation and it’s been lovely to have different people offering to lead the prayers. Quite often we are asked to remember people who have contributed to the life of the Church and to the Christian faith.

Sometimes these are well known to us, but more often than not they are rather obscure people! On these occasions we have become used to retired bishop, David Thomson, giving us a short history lesson, more often than not complemented by a photo of the unknown individual. We have come to expect and enjoy these little history lessons, but the test will be whether we remember anything about them on the anniversary next year.

These saints and others are often remembered because they have contributed to change in the Church, change in society, or change in the communities of which they were a part. Part of me, therefore, thinks it is rather ironic that we remember these saints on the same day, in the same way each and every year, and that very few of the pioneers of change of our day are added to the remembrances (although I'm sure David will correct me if I have done the editors of Common Worship a disservice there!)

If we are simply remembering people and events of the past, especially those that ushered in change, without turning our thoughts to how we change the world around us, we are relegating these pioneers to memory, instead of being inspired by their example to change the world around us ourselves, and so enabling their memory and contribution to live on more fully. Education is important, but it is what we do with what we learn that is of more importance; a fact that we are being made more and more aware of through the Black Lives Matter movement.

Perhaps the most uncomfortable question we might ask ourselves on this subject of remembering people is, "are we in danger of relegating Jesus Christ to a warm memory of someone who pioneered change, and not taking it any further?" For some, this is indeed the case; just like our memories will probably not recall the history of Saint Obscure next year, there are many who turn to the story of Jesus each Christmas or Easter and find themselves asking each year, 'so who is this, and what did he do again?' And just as David may inwardly sigh and teach us the history yet again next year, so may we be gracious with those who keep seeking Jesus year upon year, until something changes, the light dawns, and they can say with confidence, 'I know Jesus, this is what he has done for me.'

Change can be threatening, change can be uncomfortable, but change can also be life transforming and usher in a new and exciting phase.

In the gospel passage set for this week (which I have extended at the top of this, from the New Living Translation) Jesus is causing a stir, again, as he tells his followers about changes they should expect, both the cost of those changes, and the promise as a result of those changes. Jesus did not come that we might have a nice, comfortable life, but that we might be changed by believing in him, and accepting his love and forgiveness. Jesus says that if we allow him to become the first in our lives, and put nothing before him in terms of faithfulness, obedience, and love, then the reward is ours; we will be acknowledged before God in heaven.

But what about Jesus telling us to set ourselves against our families, I hear you asking? What about Jesus telling us he came to bring a sword? Surely that isn't a very loving message!

Well, Jesus was quoting from Micah, an old testament prophet who warned of what would happen when God stepped in; that some people would decide that they were comfortable enough as they were and didn't need God. When that happened, those who choose God would need to decide who took first place in their lives, whom they would prioritise, and whom they would obey, and this

would cause division. Jesus says that the change he invites us to make will be challenging and uncomfortable, but change that puts Christ first, that strives to be more like, and more intentionally turned towards Jesus, brings with it the promise of new life, new hope, new opportunity.

We are all on the precipice of change, whether we like change or not; I don't think we can ignore any longer the fact that change is coming and needs to come. In our Team of churches, we are preparing to open the churches for private prayer, and when we are able to open for worship, things will look very different. We have been forced to change the way we worship and stay spiritually healthy, and I am delighted that many are taking responsibility for their own faith by reading sermons and using the prayers offered. We have a new curate preparing to take up ministry with us and we have the promise of a new Team Rector appointment in the coming year. We face a great deal of change before us; the question is, how will we respond?

Part of the role of the parish reps for the Vacancy Process is to look at the vision of the churches, the direction in which we wish to travel, the changes we need to make as we begin a new phase in the life of our Team. For some, this will be exciting and something they look forward to, but I am well aware that some may decide that they are comfortable enough with the way things already are, or have been, and that is a choice to be made by each person. However, I would like to challenge us all to consider the opportunity and promise that comes with change that strives to put Christ at the heart of our welcome, our worship and our outreach; that we will find new life, new hope and new promise.

So as you come to pray prayers of intercession this week,

Please pray for your parish reps as they seek God's will for a new appointment, and for a vision that puts Christ at the centre of our church life and mission.

Please pray for our Team as we enter a new chapter of ministry.

Please pray for Jo, our new curate, and those who may apply for the position of Team Rector.

And please pray for yourselves, and for one another as we face the changes that lie ahead:
for those who find change difficult
for prayerful conversations about change
and that any changes made would be guided by the Holy Spirit, and would lead us into new life,
new hope and new promise for the ministry of the West Hereford Team, and for all those who will
come to know the love of God through us.

Amen

The Reverend Ruth Hulse

