

Sunday 9th August 2020

See I am doing a new thing – Isaiah 43:18-21, Ephesians 2:19-22

Talk by Laura Polaine, Prayers by Hazel Wilson

Good morning and welcome to St Johns online reflection. Today, we will be focusing on 'See I am doing a new thing' looking at two scriptures one from Isaiah 43:18-21 and the other from Ephesians 2:19-22. First, Hazel will lead us in prayer.

Let us pray:

'God of love, we come rejoicing, here to celebrate Your grace
Consecrate this sacred moment, help us meet You face to face.
In the name of Christ we gather, by His touch our lives made new,
Cleansed, renewed, restored, refashioned – all we are, and all we do'

Loving Father, thank you that we can come into Your presence freely, and bring to You the people and situations that are on our hearts and in our minds – knowing that You will listen and answer. We say, like King Jehoshaphat of old, when faced with insurmountable problems, 'Lord, we do not know what to do, but we look to You'; and hear Your reply, 'Do not be afraid or discouraged ...for the battle is not yours but God's – stand still and see the salvation of the Lord'. Our Commander is not just winning, He has won!

We are conscious of our failure to ask Your help, our independence, and hoarding of Your love. We ask for Your forgiveness – help us to look forward with You, rather than sigh over past events. Enable us to give, to share, to start again with renewed . life and purpose.

Loving Father, we pray for Your world. We have remembered this week the 75th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, and we pray for peace for all those who have suffered or are suffering as a result of war; and for wisdom and care in the use of nuclear power today. We pray Lord, for Lebanon, and all those bereaved and suffering as a result of the terrible explosion. May there be a renewal of hope and society in that land. We lift to You Lord, the Government, armed forces and police in Nigeria, as they try to tackle the increased unrest in the North and North-East States. We cry to You for your beleaguered church, where at least 121 Christians have been killed in recent weeks.

We continue to pray for all those affected by Covid-19 – physically, mentally, financially and socially; and for all who seek to alleviate their distress, both at Government and individual levels.

Loving Father, in these situations and so many others, each victim is known intimately to You, whether that pain was inflicted many years ago, or recently, and we pray for Your peace that is beyond human understanding – and the renewal and hope that Your presence brings. Father, You are more powerful than any pandemic – may Your kingdom

spread like wildfire, faster than the virus, and may thousands of souls be set free. We humans can renovate, but only You can re-create.

'The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord.
She is His new creation, by water and the word'

Loving Father, we pray for Your church worldwide, and especially for our family here at St John's – that we may truly be Your new creation – in the ways we communicate with our neighbourhood, our friends and families. Help us to find new ways to love others in response to Your love for us. Thank you for technology enabling us to be linked together; thank you that we can now re-open our church building for private prayers; and thank you for Your promise of a new person to lead and serve St John's into Your future.

We pray strength wisdom and inspiration for Ian and Val, Steve and Sue as they have great responsibilities at this time; and we pray your blessing on each person connected with St John's in just the way that they need. Help us all to embrace the 'New Things' You are doing, with our feet firmly planted on Jesus, our cornerstone.

'For I'm building a people of power, and I'm making a people of praise
Who will move through this land by My Spirit
And will glorify My precious name.
Build Your church Lord, make us strong Lord
Join our hearts Lord, through Your love.
Make us one Lord, in Your body
In the kingdom of Your Son.

In whose name we pray. Amen

Readings

Our first reading today is taken from Isaiah, chapter 43 verses 18-21 - New International Version (NIV)

¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland.
²⁰ The wild animals honor me,
the jackals and the owls,
because I provide water in the wilderness
and streams in the wasteland,
to give drink to my people, my chosen,
²¹ the people I formed for myself
that they may proclaim my praise.

Our second reading is taken from Ephesians chapter 2, verses 19-22 - New International Version (NIV)

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Talk

'See I am doing a *new thing*.' If someone said this to us, how would we respond; with excitement, caution or perhaps some uncertainty? In the readings today we learn how God is doing something new and exciting in the lives of his people. God is our creator who loves to do new things for us, and why? - because he cares for us. Isaiah 43:4 it says, 'Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you.'

In Isaiah 43 verse 19, God tells his people once again that he is going to deliver them, from Babylonian captivity. In the preceding verses it references what he did in the Exodus for them against their enemies, - 'he who made a way through the sea, a path through the mighty waters, who drew out the chariots and horses, the army and reinforcements together, and they lay there never to rise again.' We can imagine that they may well have thought 'and we know how it will be done this time' basing it on before. However, having recalled these facts, in today's reading the people are asked to- 'Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.' Now it is quite human for us to be contented with predictability, the more familiar; we don't always like surprises, but by his very nature God who is Creator, loves to do things in new ways. Because he is faithful, though he will always be consistent with himself, so he will never be arbitrary and heartless, yet that does not mean he must therefore always repeat himself.

The reason for calling people's attention to the Exodus (43:16-17) and then telling them to 'forget the former things' (43:18) is that God wants us to learn things about his character and nature from the past but not to hold on to the methods of the past. When we find something that works for us, we can cling on to it as life can be difficult and is complex. We know what we want, and we know how to get it. The result though is that we don't need faith anymore. God sometimes wants to disturb our comfort; he comes to us and dares us to believe him for a new thing in our lives, something that will force us to let go of some of the hard-won strings of control, daring to let God stretch our vision.

Whereas formerly God made a 'way through sea' (43:16), this time he will make 'a way in the dessert' (43:19). 43:18-19. The original Exodus did not exhaust God's power, but provided a pattern of new 'exodus like' deliverances. The Jewish exiles should not live in the past but look to God to bring them home from Babylon through another 'exodus' '*a way in the wilderness*'. Sometimes we may feel like we are in a dessert, but we can trust God that he has a plan for our future. Where there is no clear path forward God creates

one, rivers in the desert. Where there is no natural relief or refreshment. God provides it. In Isaiah, God promises to transform the dessert into a place of 'water' and 'streams' where his 'chosen' may have all their needs supplied (43:20). As a result his people will bear witness to his deity; in verse 21 they will 'proclaim my praise'. We can see witness as not an onerous demand but an incredible privilege. The witness we have is the expression of our experience. The exiles were not expected to make speeches but to report what they knew to be so out of their own lives. It does not have to be dramatic or attention grabbing. It is simply our story and what that story says about the reality of Christ and his ability to save.

Last week in Ephesians we looked at how Christ is our peace in this world. There is peace with God and his people because Christ has brought peace (2:14-18). We are saved through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Paul explains that between the two groups Jews and Gentiles there were barriers between them; it refers to the dividing wall of hostility. Christ destroyed the barrier by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. In one body both Jews and Gentiles are reconciled to God through the cross, essentially putting to death their hostility, and creating one new humanity. The Gentiles are accepted by God, in Christ, on an equal footing with Jews. Through Christ both Jews and Gentiles have access to the father by the Holy Spirit. This new humanity is also referenced in Corinthians 5:17-19 - Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come:^[a] The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

Paul explains that in this new humanity the people of God are the dwelling of God (2:19-22) Vs 22 - in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit, and Paul uses three familiar models of the church to unpack this: **1. God's Kingdom (v19a) 2. God's family (v19b), and 3. God's temple (vs20-22).**

If we first look at **God's Kingdom** (v19a); the Gentiles used to be stateless and disenfranchised outsiders. They were strangers, complete foreigners with no rights or privileges. But now, he says to them, you are fellow citizens with the Jewish people, citizens free and secure. No longer strangers but citizens which emphasises the contrast between the rootlessness of a life outside Christ and the stability of being a part of God's new society. Christ has enabled us to be citizens of God's Kingdom and members of his household. Our status has dramatically changed. Now we 'belong' in a way we never did before, now we have a home. Through Christ's new humanity he has brought a way to break down the barriers in today's society. Christ lives in us and shows himself to a watching world through us. People can see that God is love and that Christ is Lord as we live in harmony with each other and in accordance with what God says in his Word.

Second is the model of **God's family** (v19b). Jews and Gentiles find they are more than fellow citizens under his rule; they are together children in his family. Paul in earlier verses refers to the new and privileged access 'to the Father' which Jews and Gentiles enjoy

through Christ (vs 18), and the blessings and 'adoption' into his family. We are members of the household of God; we belong. We need to belong to have some sense of fit in the world. Christ has brought us home to God. We live in God's house and at the same time we are a house, in which God lives. We belong with God and are involved in what he is doing. The other people in the house are family with us. This home defines us. Christ has given us place in his world, and from that sense of belonging comes a growing ability to relate and accomplish the tasks to which we are called. At St John's through our vision we have said we want to 'Make St John's church a home for everyone; to care for everyone within and beyond the church family – whether it be connecting to a homegroup, or developing & equipping the prayer team. The emphasis is on brotherly/sisterly love. As St Johns we want to build our community to bring together all members as a family of Christ.

The third model is **God's temple** (vs20-22). The church is a community of people, but it can be likened to a building, and especially to a temple. The temple in Jerusalem had for nearly a thousand years been the focal point of Israel's identity as the people of God.

Nothing is more important to any construction than a solid, stable foundation. We have Jesus' well-known parable of the two house builders, with which he concluded his sermon on the mount, teaching the need for rock. On what rock is the church built? Paul replies it is built upon the foundation of the 'apostles and prophets' (vs20). This means that the church is not built on modern ideas but rather on the spiritual heritage given to us by the early apostles and prophets of the Christian church. Key to the foundation is the cornerstone. It is itself part of and essential to the foundation; it helps to hold the building steady. The temple in Jerusalem had massive cornerstones. Cornerstones in ancient buildings were the primary load-bearing stones that determined the lines of the building. Such stones have been found in Palestine, one weighing as much as 570 tons. Armitage Robinson mentions one ancient monolith excavated from the southern wall of the Jerusalem temple, measured 38 feet 9 inches (about 12 metres) in length. In addition to the architectural connotations of cornerstone, it is highlighted in Isaiah 28:16 that it was significant because it promised security in a time of destruction. Even if a flood came and washed everything away, the cornerstone provided a place of refuge.

The chief cornerstone of the new temple is Christ Jesus himself. Christ makes the whole building possible, including the rest of the foundation. He is the promised place of security on which the community of God is built. He holds the growing church together as a unity, not as uniformity as we are all different, but brought to unity through our diversity). The unity and growth of the church are coupled. It is like branches in the vine and the members in the body. As a building depends for both its cohesion and development on being secured to its cornerstone, so Christ the cornerstone is indispensable to the church's unity and growth.

We are joined together, each built together as stones that make up this building in which God dwells. Sometimes we may see ourselves as just individuals, but it is now one new being made up of us all. We cannot separate our relation with God from our relation with other people. We are all part of the building each stone is important as we grow. We have

said in our Vision ‘To build our church, St John’s needs us all to become more involved to find our place and to play our part.’ Although we have not been able to meet in St John’s physical building in lockdown we have been able to continue through services and homegroups via zoom, foodbank, and CAP etc to ‘be and do’ church.

Looking to the future, just as this new temple’s purpose is to be ‘a dwelling place of God in the spirit we as his redeemed people will also be his home in heaven. For the building is not yet complete. It grows into a holy temple in the Lord. Only after the creation of the new heaven and the new earth will the voice from the throne declare with finality – Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. (Rev 21:3) and where ‘He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone.’

To close - the MSG version of **Ephesians 2:19-22** ‘That’s plain enough, isn’t it? You’re no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You’re no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He’s using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he’s using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.’

Let us pray:

Father –thank you for being the creator of new things; that through Jesus he is our peace, the one in whom all are united, the one who gives access to the Father, and the cornerstone on whom the building grows. Help us to be a visual model of the gospel, to demonstrate for others the good news of reconciliation. Help us to demonstrate church to be and seen to be witness to this single new humanity, a model of human community, a family of reconciled brothers and sisters who love their Father and love each other, the evident dwelling place of God by his Spirit. Only then will the world believe in Christ as Peacemaker. Only then will God receive the glory due to his name.

Amen

Closing Prayer

As we await our coming Saviour,
Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ, Amen