



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 4 October 2020

Readings: Philippians 3.4b-14; Exodus 20.1-4; Matthew 21.33-46

I wonder how you are feeling about church life these days?

There are, of course, some who are content. It is what it is, and that's fine. Maybe even better than that: meaningful and satisfying, faith-enabling and care-giving, God's mission-serving. And a moving melding of the two congregations from complementary but not identical traditions – ironically perhaps made stronger by the pandemic.

Perhaps there are some who are complacent. It's good enough, but up to someone else anyway.

Others have real questions about what the future holds, as both church and society pass through seasons of such upheaval. How are we to ensure The Church is relevant, transformative and flourishing in a world re-shaped by migration, climate change, pandemics and evangelical atheism?

Then there are people who are concerned about us spending considerable sums of money and wondering how – if - it will be justified by what we do in and from our renewed building.

Content, complacent, questioning, concerned – perhaps most of us have visited all of them from time to time.

Few, I imagine, are unaware of the realities of church decline today. It's the elephant in the sanctuary. Lesslie Newbigin – who worshipped in this chapel in the 1930s - returned to England after forty years serving the world church and found Britain a more difficult mission field than the one he had left behind' <sup>1</sup> in India – at once constitutionally secular and instinctively spiritual. Trenchantly, he wrote: 'England is a pagan society and the development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the church.' <sup>2</sup> We may not use quite that language ourselves, but Bishop Lesslie expresses a vital truth – that we live in an era when we cannot take for granted that people know about God as God is in Jesus Christ. 'We have a gospel to proclaim. Good news for all throughout the earth.' The measure of whether we are being what we are called to be is neither more nor less than 'are we proclaiming that good news in what we say and in what we do?'

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<sup>1</sup> Bolsinger, Tod 2015 *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian leadership in uncharted territory* Downers Grove: IVP page 29

<sup>2</sup> Newbigin, Lesslie 1985 *Unfinished Agenda: an autobiography* London: SPCK page 249

This morning's communion service is based upon prayers from the church in New Zealand. As, at the table, we give thanks to God, we will pray: 'You send your Holy Spirit to strengthen and to guide, to warn and to revive your Church.'<sup>3</sup>

Are there any of those we don't need? There, from the world church as far away from here as it is possible to be, is the prayer for our time and place. How we need *strength* for when we feel drained; *guidance* for when we are all at sea; *warning* for when we 'plod along afraid to dream or hope';<sup>4</sup> *revival*, to be the church as fruitful in our time as were our forebears in theirs.

Today's reading from Matthew's Gospel was another of the parables that was maybe designed to arrest and inspire The Church. Scholars disagree over whether it records words of Jesus to his hearers as he looked *forwards* to his death, or tells us what the early church came to believe about Jesus as it looked *back* at his death. Either way, it seems clear the narrative is directed at the religious leaders of the day. If we read it as an allegory, they're the wicked tenants of the parable, who reject all the emissaries – the prophets - of the owner - God, including his son, Jesus.

I think we do well not to leave this parable's finger pointing at the religious of two millennia ago. Might it not be pointing at us as the religious of our time, too? Faced with the challenges and dilemmas of being the twenty first century Church today, and knowing our need of strength, guidance, warning and revival, I am minded that what Jesus was suggesting to them is what he suggests to us.

I'd like to stress two particular points that I hear Jesus making. First, that the challenge is to understand who Jesus really is and what he offers and asks. Even the disciples – those committed to following Jesus and to learning from him – even they thought him a mere prophet. But this is the owner's Son. Do we get that? He doesn't just *talk about* God to us, with an anecdote here and a *bon mot* there. This Jesus is 'the gift of God's very self to the world'. He is God humbly coming amongst us, patiently waiting for us, durably sticking with us, abiding in us that we might abide in him, amazingly call us to partner God in life-giving mission to the world.

To be The Church in the world is not to be a community whose good works make The Church look good. It is to be a community of those whose good works reveal the one who 'emptied himself of all but love'.<sup>5</sup> And why? So that in the midst of pandemic and decline, of global warming and international warring, we persuade the world to trust not itself but its maker. Whatever we do from our renewed building, the message must be clear: you belong, you matter, you are God's.

The second thing I hear Jesus saying to the religious of his time is that it's bearing fruit which matters. Our Christian lives are not to be solely about pietistic introspection, less still pursuing 'theories of everything', but, even as we pray and think, about living for the common good in a world of so much uncertainty and anxiety. As we anticipate the completion of the redevelopment work on Downing Place United Reformed Church,

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<sup>3</sup> The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia 1989 *A New Zealand Prayer Book* New York: HarperCollins page 497

<sup>4</sup> Thorne, Leo S. ed 2012, 1983 *Prayers from Riverside* Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press page 126

<sup>5</sup> Charles Wesley 1707-88, from the hymn, *And can it be* RS 366.3.3

there will be some nice things that make it a sacred space to value and, I pray, in which to sense the numinous – the presence, the power and the peace of God. But I fear that all of that will be as nothing unless at the same time it is like a springboard, even a catapult, sending us out into the world to kneel with those who are otherwise treated as if they're the least and the last, to speak truth to power, and to offer hope that migrates us from half-living to abundant life.

Ultimately, I believe it is clinging resolutely to these messages from Jesus to the religious people of another time and clime that will open us to receive that strength and guidance, warning and revival for which the Kiwi Church teaches to pray. As we take them to heart, my own sense is that they will not send us back into the past, to recreate what once we were, but compel us into the next chapter of our life and work – grateful for yesterday but committed to tomorrow. As Tod Bolsinger has it, 'The answer is not to try harder but to start a new adventure.'<sup>6</sup>

So be it, and thanks be to God who is forever doing a new thing.

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<sup>6</sup> Bolsinger, page 33