



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 23rd January 2022

Epiphany III. Readings: *Nehemiah 8.1-10; Mark 10.46-52*

Wilbur Smith died in November. He was a prolific Zambian-born novelist, who delighted in the history upon which he ceaselessly drew. His own life being a colourful story, he peppered his books with family narratives of high drama and costly passion. As one critic has it, 'With Wilbur Smith the action is never further than the turn of a page.' (*Independent* – on frontispiece of *When the Lion Feeds*)

There is also insight about life. In the Courtney sequence of novels, one of the chief characters is Sean, who is estranged from his family. Brought up to farm, he's subsequently both made and lost a fortune in the Johannesburg Gold Rush of the 1880s. He rediscovers his dignity and wealth by hunting in the bush of the Northern Transvaal, along the banks of the Limpopo River. Married to someone who had never been to Johannesburg, Sean Courtney takes Katrina to see it – to help her understand that part of his life. But just as the burgeoning bustling city was alien to her as a farmer's daughter, so it was no longer what he remembered, either. He has second thoughts about having returned. Wilbur Smith gives us a glimpse of Sean's thinking:

*'The past was lost – and he knew then that you can never go back. Nothing is the same, for reality can exist in one time only and in one place only. Then it dies and you have lost it and you must go on to find it at another time and in another place.'*¹

I wonder if that speaks into any of our realities? After all, few of us are exempt from the major upheavals and transitions that punctuate life.

When we move from one town to another, 'nothing is the same'.

After a divorce or a bereavement, 'nothing is the same'.

Since the pandemic, 'nothing is the same'.

After tsunamis strike, 'nothing is the same'.

When international humanitarian aid dries up, 'nothing is the same'.

When fuel and NI costs push household spending of the available £20 from 'nineteen, nineteen and six to twenty pounds ought and six', 'nothing is the same'.²

When illness or injury re-shape us, 'nothing is the same'.

As we move from one era to another in church life, 'nothing is the same'.

Sean Courtney's observation, however, is not just that 'nothing is the same'. He senses that reality still exists but that it has changed: '*you must go on to find it at another time and in another place.*' If we have been through any of life's major transitions, perhaps we know that, too. Courtney reinvented himself from farmer to miner to hunter, and ultimately to soldier. Life rarely leaves us where it finds us. And even if we used to think that that only happens to people in best-selling novels, the Covid-19 years teach us that 'nothing is the

¹ Smith, Wilbur 1964, 2018 *When the Lion Feeds* London: Bonnier Books page 498

² Dickens, Charles 1850 *David Copperfield* Chapter XII

same', but that there is another time and another place in which to dwell and, please God, in which freshly to flourish.

Indeed, this morning's Bible readings suggest that, when it's inter-twined with God, life is designed to be a pilgrimage, to go forward, to evolve.

We heard first of **Bartimaeus**. Street-dwelling, begging and outcast, he longed to see. Mark uses a Greek word that implies Bartimaeus had not been born blind. He asks to see 'again'. He wants to go back to things as they were, and, at face value, that's what happens: 'immediately he regained his sight.' There's more though; far more. This story is the last of Jesus' miracles of which St Mark tells us. We segue hastily from this scene into Mark's vivid and urgent Wilbur Smith-like telling of the last week of Jesus's life. Action is never much further than the next verse. So Mark is instantly telling of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. By placing the healing of Bartimaeus at this pivotal, strategic point of his Gospel, Mark is throwing down his characteristic challenge for the last time: take this Jesus seriously; join him on the way ... to the Cross, and beyond. Our writer stresses that point with the final phrase we heard. Remember how he puts it? 'Immediately [the man] regained his sight and followed [Jesus] on the way.' It's an exquisite piece of storytelling: as we meet Bartimaeus, he's 'sitting by the roadside', and as we leave him, he's 'following Jesus on the road'.³ Although he wants to go back to things the way they were, his encounter with Jesus makes that impossible. He is irresistibly called to discipleship; to a new life. 'Nothing is the same'.

And then we heard from **Nehemiah**. With Ezra, these two Old Testament figures are cloaked in mystery. We know little of them, and their writings. They're located in the Bible just after the six history books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles, and, for sure, Ezra and Nehemiah do hint at some historical background, though its obscurity tends to mean it begs more questions than bring clarity. That said, the verses we heard this morning are a rich source of encouragement in a time of transition and change. Nehemiah, the Governor, and Ezra, perhaps a secretary, are caught up in the return of the people of Judah from their exile in Babylon. After decades away from Jerusalem, the people long for things to be restored to how they were. They're relieved that captivity and oppression at the hands of others are over. They want to rebuild their city and especially the Temple – they're precious symbols of their identity as the people of God. Like Sean Courtney and Bartimaeus, though, they find nothing is the same. The reconstruction of the Temple is fraught and faltering, and although Haggai suggests its latter splendour will be greater than the former, it's physically smaller and less ostentatiously magnificent.⁴ Moreover, there is a persistent challenge from the Samaritans who resent and oppose the Jews' restoration of the Temple and of the Jewish religious community. Gradually, the people of Judah have to come to terms with the painful truth that '*reality can exist in one time only*'. Times have changed and so must they.

Crucial to this narrative, we find the words of Nehemiah. Surprisingly, the people are to have a festival – a celebratory day of undiluted focus upon God – and specifically upon God's law and promises. It maybe that we find in these verses some clues to what should typify our worship: coming together, hearing the scriptures, and receiving a blessing.

And not only so. There's to be a party as well: eat the best, maybe 'of the fat' and drink the sweetest, maybe wine mixed with honey. You see, whatever life brings, God is good and to be enjoyed as an inextinguishable light in darkness. We do well to note this party is not about

³ cf Hooker, Morna 1991 *The Gospel according to St Mark – Black's New Testament Commentaries* London: A & C Black page 252

⁴ Haggai 2.9

unrelieved self-indulgence. They're to send a portion of the fare to those who have nothing. You see, for people of faith – whichever faith it is - commitment to the common good, honouring the needy of the community, is not an added extra, a minority interest for those who have particularly severe case of religious do-gooding. As Downing Place Church, as CBM, or as any other charity, being a blessing to others is core behaviour for those who accept a blessing for themselves.

Nehemiah's punchline is important: 'the joy of the Lord is your strength'. It seems that even as the Governor wants to exhort them to devout worship and to good works, ultimately, he urges them to trust that their strength and hope for this new beginning as they come home from exile, is because of God's faithfulness, mercy and steadfast kindness – 'most of all, that love has found us'.⁵ Sure, nothing is the same. And who knows what the future will bring, or how we'll mess up? But come what may, we can rely upon 'the joy of the Lord'.

Honest engagement with life as it is reveals this heady mix of stuff that delights us and stuff that distresses us. And the balance between the two is different for different people, and for each of us that balance between what delights and what distresses differs at different stages of life. In the midst of either, the place of faith in God is significant. As we find from today's stories, 'nothing will ever be the same', except that God remains God, loyal, forgiving and loving, and calls us to love the Lord our God with all we have and are, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.⁶

May it be so, and whatever tomorrow's reality is, may the joy of the Lord be your strength.
Amen

N. P. Uden

23rd January 2022

⁵ from the Hymn *For the fruits of all creation* by Fred Pratt Green RS 42.3.7

⁶ Mark 12.29-31