

Synod Sermon

Friday 7 Sept, 2018

Goulburn Cathedral

Luke 5:33-39

The Lord calls us to drink the new wine of the gospel and follow with discernment in the footsteps of Jesus

‘No one puts new wine into old wineskins’. Why not? Well the old wineskins will be brittle and when the new wine begins to ferment it will burst the wineskins. But in truth it hardly needs explaining. It’s the bleeding obvious. It’s common sense. Nothing radical here; not rocket science. If you like a drop of wine then you’ll make sure you’ll look after it.

And by the way ‘Don’t tear off a piece from a new garment to patch an old garment’. This doesn’t really need explaining either. It’s obvious. Why tear the new garment? Anyway, it won’t match the old. And frankly even if it did when the garment was wet the new patch would stretch, the stitches break. You can’t patch up an old garment using new cloth.

Try to imagine for a moment the reaction of those hearing these words: religious leaders; Jesus’ group other hangers on. Maybe ‘wow this is scintillating stuff; never heard anything like this before’. Or maybe ‘so what else is new?’ Or maybe ‘Please explain?’

The homely everyday unsurprising hardly worth a mention really. Nobody really cottons on I suspect. But maybe they’re suspicious. If I had been one of the religious leaders and earlier in the day I’d been present when a lame man had been lowered through a roof and Jesus had spoken a word of forgiveness and the chap had walked out of the house; and later I’d witnessed Jesus having a party with tax collectors and

sinners and then I decided to have a go at Jesus disciples about eating and drinking while observant and devout disciples fasted and prayed; maybe I'd be suspicious. The parables about wine and patches are innocuous enough and in their usual settings commonplace. But our gospel writer has located these homely sayings of Jesus in the midst of offence; socially frowned upon behaviour and basic disrespect for religious convention. Concealed, perhaps poorly, in two common sayings is something quite radical; indeed disturbing. And immediately following this passage Luke begins another event with the words 'One sabbath', so you know there's trouble ahead as well. It's a nice rhetorical device; a benign word from Jesus – a homely parable- is set within a narrative of offence, dispute, and controversy. Inside the glove of two simple parables is an iron fist; an assessment is being made about the rules, regulations, customs and religious observances of the day; old wineskins; old garments.

There's something new here; it will burst the tradition; it will break it open; it can't be made to fit. To try to do so would risk losing the new altogether. The new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled. What's more the wineskins will be destroyed.

As one commentator states: Jesus here "pits his own, new way against the old way of the Pharisees and their scribes." Jesus has brought something new, and the rituals and traditions of official Judaism cannot contain it. What is new: he breaks through the barriers: those despised, considered unworthy of the kingdom are welcomed; those incapacitated by life's circumstances are healed and forgiven; his horizon is the coming kingdom and in the light of this, the rules, laws and regulations for piety are recalibrated – not so much abolished as transcended. It is a radical move; it is good news. In the early second century, the heretic Marcion used the passage to justify a total separation between the religion that Jesus and Paul espoused and that of the Hebrew Scriptures. One interpreter sees the parable as depicting the difficulty of teaching disciples with prior learning as compared to teaching new, uneducated disciples. Unlearning can be quite a challenge. Just ask anyone over 40.

There is a radical gospel tucked away in these simple parables.

So, it's out with the old and in with the new. Discard the inheritance; plant the new thing. You can see how this gospel reading is dangerous. As the reformers said of scripture it could easily be used like a *nose of wax*. It could be bent in whatever direction as needed. It is so easy for someone or a group in the church today to take the high ground, pronounce another section brittle wineskins, old cloth and claim their way is better. In other words, this radical gospel can too easily become the plaything of whoever wants to stake a claim.

In truth in our society today there are such deep ambiguities. We live in a culture quick to discard yesterday's whatever: idea, plan, people, program. We seem to have a mania to replace; built in obsolescence is almost expected. The economist Richard Sennett refers to the emergence of a culture of uselessness; the privileging of potential over experience. In this context, the gospel today looks very attractive; new wine, new wineskins; forget the old garments.

This is where we need a deeper discernment about how we might follow the voice of the living God. Part of the problem is that often what we think is the new radical thing that must be honoured. But perhaps its radical because it's our latest thought bubble. Maybe new dogs might be simply learning old tricks; and they don't even know it!

Don't get me wrong. There is a sting in the tale of this gospel reading. It may indeed be wise to exercise discretion when considering some new strategy. But the real barb comes at the end. 'And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "The old is good."' The mania for the next new thing is easily matched by steadfast resistance to change. The church, like many institutions is caught between a furtive search for the next new idea on the one hand and on the other hand a deep commitment to holding on the ways of life that maintain the status quo. Nostalgia has a powerful grip on societies and institutional life; let's make the church great again. I recall years ago in another diocese where I was a bishop (that would be Adelaide!) where despite the best efforts of some people in a cooperative parish set up, there was a deep refusal to make the changes required in order to open the way for new

things to emerge for the sake of the coming kingdom. I remember at the time thinking for some *the pain of dying was preferable to the cost of living*. ‘And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, “The old is good.”’ We need discernment to discover what we need to cherish and nurture into the future.

As ever the gospel can be a two-edged sword. Don’t refuse the new that brings life; be careful that change for change sake doesn’t blur our sense of the gold threads that have shaped our lives as people of God. In other words, beware cheap wine. Yet beware lest we cling to the past for fear of what it will require of us. Bishop Trevor’s Synod Address offered us some clues about what the new wine of the Church might look like: a mixed economy church; a church that values wisdom, flexibility and collaboration. These are the ingredients for a discerning and faithful church on a journey with Christ. This is a church of the good wine. And we need leaders who embody this way of life.

May this Synod be a time of discernment; of prayerful waiting upon the Lord; open to new things, wisdom to cherish the things that have sustained us. Such things are embodied in our eucharistic life: here in this service of thanksgiving we are offered the sacrament par excellence the living Christ under the symbols and signs of bread and wine. Here we are made anew in the Spirit. Here is brought into the present the radical way of Christ; here we are offered a foretaste of the new wine of the coming Kingdom.

So let us prepare our hearts, minds and souls to be made anew; for Christ’s sake we pray.

Amen

+Stephen Pickard