
LIVING THE CROSS IN A CHANGING
WORLD

LENTEN STUDIES

YEAR C

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“A NEW THING—A CROSS”, FIFTH SUNDAY IN LENT, YEAR C

Isaiah 43.16–21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3.3–14; John 12.1–8

Isaiah 43.16–21

¹⁶Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,

¹⁷who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;

they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

¹⁸Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

¹⁹I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

²⁰The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

God is the God of new things

“I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it (19)?” This is a key theme of Lent and Easter. God is not bound by the past. God is bound by neither natural obstacles such as the sea or raging waters nor by human military or political power (16–17). The nations are impotent before God. And Babylon, the place of exile, of pain, shame and captivity, is no match for his power (read 14–15).

New Exodus

The prophet reminds the people, terrified and cowed in Babylon, that God once brought a rabble out of Egypt in the face of the greatest military power of the day and the region. He once led them through a wilderness too. That wilderness wandering was not Israel’s finest hour. Grumbling, fear and lack led to a collapse of trust and then to judgment; forty years of wandering, death and even Moses not able to enter the land. Will this new wilderness crossing be like that? Will it be fraught with danger and judgment? Forget it says the prophet (18). God will do something new.

New Provision

Just as the waters once parted now the desert will become a highway supplied by fresh water all along the way (19b-21). The wild animals will praise God. God will turn judgement into life and praise. The people are nurtured and protected from every harm.

New people of praise

He will re-form his people, his own, so that they too will declare to the world the salvation of God. The people of God are integral to God’s purposes for the world. They have experienced the new thing that God has on offer; they are a people of praise and worship because of the new thing that God offers the world. They are God’s ‘sacrament’ for the world, the substance of his grace.

God builds on what he has accomplished in the past but is always looking to do a new thing that is consistent the past but not the same. Wilderness experience might be one of judgment (Exodus/Numbers) or salvation (Isaiah).

This passage forms part of the biblical ‘air’ that Jesus and his disciples lived, breathed walked in. It nurtured their vision of God and what God was about to do. When Jesus declared that God’s rule had begun in him this kind of theological imagination was what the people responded to. God’s new thing has begun at last.

Questions: How open are we to God’s new thing? How would you answer the prophet’s question, “...do you not perceive it?” How do we learn to perceive God’s new things? What gets in the way? What new thing might God be doing with us? How is our church, in its praise of God’s new thing in Christ, a sacrament for the world?

Psalm 126

A Song of Ascents.

¹When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,

we were like those who dream.

²Then our mouth was filled with laughter,

and our tongue with shouts of joy; then it was said among the nations,

‘The LORD has done great things for them.’ ³The LORD has done great things for us,

and we rejoiced.

⁴Restore our fortunes, O LORD,
like the watercourses in the Negeb.

⁵May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy.

⁶Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing,

shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.

This is the seventh of the Psalms of Ascents sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem for one of the festivals. They remember God’s deliverance in the past (1–3), petition God for help in the present (4–5) and profess their trust in God’s help (6).

The new day

It is easy to imagine the joy of the returning exiles from Babylon on the sight of their homeland and of the Jerusalem (1–4); home and free at last. The prophet Isaiah had promised a new day, God’s new thing. It was like a dream come true. Laughter and joy are the best expressions for the experience of God’s redemption and they are the best witness we can offer. Even other nations, often seen as enemies, take note of God’s redemption and Israel was fulfilling its mission to be the light of the world (Isaiah 42.6).

But . . .

However, life is never a smooth road and now they are experiencing severe setbacks (4–5). We do not know what has happened but tears and weeping seem to be their present lot in contrast to the joy and laughter of the first few verses. They see themselves as dry wadi beds in the Negev, the desert to the South. No-one looks to them to find the amazing work of God or to find spiritual refreshment.

Instead, they long to be like the dry wadi beds after rain, filling with water and bringing life to everything that surrounds them. They can blossom again and be the place where people come to find renewal and life in a dry land.

Sowing is always an act of anticipation and hope but if drought intervenes it seems hopeless and many tears are shed. In their need they turn to God in the trust that the seemingly hopeless act of sowing turns into joyful harvesting. The key to this psalm is

the hope deeply embedded in it; hope draws from the well-springs of the past. God can redeem, God can set free, and God can bring us home and make laughter flow again.

This is a good Lenten (and Advent) psalm as we remember we live between memory and hope: memory reminds us of the past and hope builds on that for a joyous future. During Lent we remind ourselves of the humbling even humiliating circumstances of Christ's death; yet we do so in the light of the resurrection and the promise of the renewal of all things. We sow in tears that we may reap in joy.

We must live as a visionary people and our past helps us do that. The past should liberate us for the future, not bind us in chains of fear.

Questions: Are we bound to the past by chains of fear? How can we be a visionary people? How can we witness in joy and laughter?

Philippians 3.3–14

³For it is we who are the circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and boast in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh—⁴even though I, too, have reason for confidence in the flesh.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more:⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee;⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹²Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.

Context

To fully understand this passage it is important to read the whole chapter 3:1–4:1. This passage is one in which Paul tells us something of the significance of his conversion for his understanding of the Gospel (see also Galatians 1:13–16).

The key theme

Paul's theme is inclusiveness. Paul defends the right of non-Jewish Christians to come to the faith without the processes and demands of the law (1–4). He asserts the

inclusiveness of the Gospel as opposed to the exclusivist notions of some early Christians. He does so vigorously because of his own experience as a zealous proponent of such exclusivism. Paul persecuted the Hellenistic Christians because they threatened Israel's distinctiveness and boundaries. All his previous life he had given over to ensuring that his righteousness separated him, not only from gentiles, but also from other Jews who did not share his views (4–6).

What happened?

Christ Jesus had made him his own (12). Using the image of the profit and loss account, the things he once regarded as assets he now writes off as a loss for the sake of Christ. The gain in Christ far outweighs the value of whatever Paul possessed. They are like excrement to him. What is it he has gained? He describes it as knowing Christ, gaining Christ, being found in him and having a righteousness that comes from God. Christ has captured him, included him, and welcomed him so that he no longer had to compete with others to live a life of righteousness before God that would exclude others. In Christ he could find a righteousness that was God given and based on Christ's faithfulness (2.1–11). Paul expands the idea of knowing Christ (10– 11) to knowing the power of the risen Christ in his life.

What follows?

The consequences of that may well be suffering as he follows Christ. Paul could never be complacent, thinking that he had arrived at some perfect state (12). He concentrates on the goal ahead, no longer looking backward to what he has lost. The precise nature of the prize (14) is unstated but the context suggests that it is the moment when he shall fully know what it means that Christ has made him his own: the resurrection. Unlike his earlier zealousness this "race" is not a competition that only one can win and all the rest will be excluded. It is an inclusive race, the outcome of which depends on Christ's hold on us.

Questions: Do we know Christ's righteousness in our lives? Do we know the power of his resurrection? Has Christ taken hold of us? Has that made us inclusive in our outlook and practice?

John 12.1–8

¹Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. ²There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. ³Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. ⁴But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, ⁵'Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?' ⁶(He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) ⁷Jesus

said, 'Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. ⁸You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.'

Context

Jesus' enemies plan to put him to death (11.53) and this theme dominates chapter 11. Jesus can no longer go about freely but retreats to a wilderness area with his disciples and friends (11.54). The Passover preparations are in progress and whether Jesus will come to the Jerusalem celebrations is the talking point for many people. His enemies are powerful and they have put out that they must know where Jesus is and they have their spies and agents on the lookout among the people. They wish to arrest Jesus and begin the legal processes to put him to death. Passover and Jesus' death are now historically and theologically linked.

The end is near

Six days before the Passover Jesus comes from his retreat to Bethany, the town of Lazarus, to share a meal with the family. It is a provocative move because the raising of Lazarus which created the crisis recorded in the previous chapter and led to the plan to kill Jesus. Lazarus is there and Martha serves this time without grumbling or arrogance. Lazarus is a sign of the glory of God and the glory of the Son of man (11.4).

So the story of the anointing of Jesus makes us aware that we are rapidly approaching 'the end.' Jesus' crucifixion is near; John tells us six days away. Mary's wiping of Jesus' feet prefigures his washing of his disciples' feet in chapter 13. The fragrance emphasises the extravagance of Mary's act of love and devotion (3-4).

Unfaithful discipleship

In John's account Judas protests the extravagance. One year's salary spent on perfume, indeed! And to be wasted on a wandering prophet! The author's note on the character of Judas puts it all in perspective. How quickly we criticise to cover up our own deficiencies, even our own evil. Judas is the model of the unfaithful disciple: overtly caring covertly hypocritical, even criminal. We know about that in our own day.

Faithful discipleship

Mary is the pattern of faithful discipleship. She knows how to respond to Jesus without being told. She fulfils Jesus love command (Chapter 13) before he has even given it. She embraces his death while others protest. She understands the significance of Jesus' death and anoints him in preparation for it. This maybe a violent premeditated judicial death but it is like a fragrance that will fill the world.

Jesus' words about the poor does not denigrate them (8): in the context of John it simply reminds the disciples that they have very little time left to respond to Jesus. The incarnation of the Word and the approaching death are once-for-all events and they are passing quickly. Jesus loved the poor and died to set them free. On the other hand

he needed his earliest disciples to respond to him so that they could carry on his ministry and not become like Judas. Judas' selfishness is the reason there are the poor. Judas' solution to the 'problem of the poor' does not include repentance from his selfishness. It does not include Jesus' commitment to the poor.

Questions: What are the characteristics of faithful discipleship? How does Judas serve as a warning? What does Jesus' death mean for you?

Further reflections

How can God's new thing come with a cross attached? Many people find the idea stupid or repulsive or both. Our friends in Judaism and Islam both reject the idea that God's salvation of the world somehow involves the crucifixion of the Messiah. They both define themselves over and against such a view. And yet this remains central to Christian faith, worship and service. Paul once called the cross God's power (1 Corinthians 1.18–25) being well aware of how ridiculous that sounded. Christians have always identified the Cross as the source of subversive memory that feeds the hope for freedom life and renewal. That is why the Eucharist is not just a hollow memorial, a longing for a time long past and forgotten. It is the weekly promise of renewal and life subverting all secular hope in political power.

So let me ask you the question again; what does Jesus' death mean for you?