

Genesis 21: 8-21
Psalm 86: 1-10, 16-17
Romans 6: 1b-11
St. Matthew 10: 24-39

Pentecost 4 2023.

“So we too might walk in in newness of life.”

Romans 6: 4b

I don't know the name of the parish, but the story is likely true: A few years ago, a new vicar in England – what we Canadian Anglicans would call the “rector” or the “parish priest” – came to serve in a new parish... In this particular parish church, there was a piano near the front on one side of the Church building... In the vicar's opinion, the piano would fit better on the *other* side of the front of the chancel... However, he suspected that if he brought it up with the Parish Council or Board, they would turn down the idea. “After all,” they would likely say, “the piano has been fine just where it is for years. Why move it now?...” So the vicar did something a bit sneaky: Every week, he would move the piano *very slightly* – perhaps a few inches – toward the direction he thought it should go in. The change was so gradual, nobody seemed to notice, or care. In about a year's time, the piano was located where the vicar wanted it to be...

This story can resonate with a lot of us, because there's always a certain tension in parish life, between upholding the *old*, and embracing the *new*. Somehow, we need to learn to embrace the best of both...

Let's look to Jesus Christ himself – the first direction we ought always to look!... On the one hand, Jesus Christ understood himself to be the fulfilment of God's plan, and his nation's longing, for generations. Matthew 5: 17: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets. I did not come to abolish, but to fulfil...” The Messiah didn't parachute out of nowhere. The very Word of God himself, God the Son, became incarnate into a particular historical place and culture, to restore humankind to God...

For about 2000 years, Christians have looked *back* in time to the movement of Jesus the Messiah in history, to make sense of how we are to live beautifully for God today... So, in one sense, we are always meant to measure the present with the measuring-stick of past events...

As well, we are convinced that God continues to work in his people through history. Very often the universal Church has got it wrong – occasionally, spectacularly wrong!... But not always!... We carry the Holy Spirit within us, and among us in the Body of Christ... Let's remind one another of the faithfulness of many countless people in the Church's history, to whom we owe an enormous debt we can never repay... We can appreciate Tradition – not in the sense of dead habits, but in the sense of *passing on* a lively faith... (Tradition, incidentally, comes from a word which means “to pass on,” like passing on a baton in a relay race. We're called to receive the gospel, and to hand it on...)

So, we see that in a very real sense, we're called to *look back* in history. Our lives in the present are meant to be informed by the person and ministry of the Lord Jesus; and secondarily, the Church, living in response to Jesus...

At the same time, Jesus Christ calls you and me, and all people, into something radically *new*... Jesus Christ showed us a new way of living. We observe Christ's frustration at people's legalistic way of observing the Sabbath rest and other rules, while failing to show mercy and healing to a broken world. Jesus Christ tells us that the "last will be first, and the first will be last." Most stunning of all, the torture and crucifixion of Jesus the Messiah is not a defeat, but God's glorious victory over all that enslaves us...

We need to challenge one another, and ourselves, that we are being called into something *new* by God himself! – the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ and his kingdom...

The early Christians realized that as we respond to Christ in baptism, God's Spirit is at work in our lives in a new way. We are never really the same as we have been, ever again. Today's second reading makes it plain that we are a "new" creation. We have participated in Jesus' death and resurrection by our baptisms:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Romans 6: 1-4)

"So if anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (II Corinthians 5: 17)

The core of the faith has already been established, through the person and work of Jesus Christ. We're called to embrace this wonderful news, to cherish it and to live it, in the community of the Church family... But we're also called to embrace change. We need to learn to live a new, more disciplined life, and to leave behind all those sinful habits which are a kind of slow poison... Let's be honest – that's no so easy! Many of us are pretty comfortable the way we are, and we tend to underestimate the serious trouble we're in, with so many of our habits. We can only change with the help of God's grace...

These changes which need to take place, over time, are not just about personal holiness or sanctification (important as those are). These changes need to include *loving* God, with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. These changes mean loving our neighbours as ourselves – yes, even those people we don't find it so easy to love!... It also means being prepared to make changes in our liturgy and common life. We might like the piano on one side (as it were), but God may be inviting to consider another approach – whatever it may be...

God has made us into something new. We are adopted sons and daughters of the living God, and we have been made worthy to inherit a kingdom of joy which will never end, in this life and the next.

Painful as it often is, we also need to be prepared to break habits in our lives which (when we're being honest and thoughtful about ourselves) are less than God's best...

In the gospel reading for today, the Lord Jesus warns us that living for him might even shake up our family relationships. But the gospel reading also concludes with a very important promise, which makes it all worthwhile: God is *with us...* He knows the number of hairs on our heads. We belong to him, now and for ever.

Amen.