

Behold I am Doing a New Thing

Clergy Conference Eucharist

Friday 4 September 2009

Just last week I finished reading David Lodge's most recent book *Deaf Sentence*. It draws on his own experience of increasing deafness and includes the usual mixture of humour and pathos for which Lodge has become famous. His *Nice Work* was dramatised on television. But it was his 1980 novel *How Far Can You Go?* that shot him to stardom. It is still a great read. Let me give you just a tiny taster. He's writing about the changes in the liturgy that Vatican II brought to the Roman Catholic Church, this time at a university chaplaincy:

'Each week the students chose their own readings, bearing on some topical theme, and sometimes they were not taken from Scripture at all, but might be articles from the *Guardian* about racial discrimination or poems by the Liverpool poets about teenage promiscuity or some blank-verse effusion of their own composition. The music was similarly eclectic in style – Negro spirituals and gospel songs, Sydney Carter's modern hymns, the calypso setting of the "Our Father", Protestant favourites like "Amazing Grace" and "Onward Christian Soldiers" and sometimes pop classics like Simon and Garfunkel's "Mrs Robinson" (*Jesus loves you more and more each day, hey, hey, hey!*) or The Beatles' "All You Need is Love". At the bidding prayers anyone was free to chip in with a petition, and the congregation might find itself praying for the success of the Viet Cong, or the recovery of someone's missing tortoise ...'

Lodge is brilliant at setting this all in the context of the times – the shadow of the bomb, flower power, the Prague Spring, the sexual revolution. He also captures the confusion, perplexity and simply the muddle that people (even loyal Roman Catholics) found themselves in about religion and faith. Change seemed unavoidable but everything seemed to have gone out with the bathwater – baby and all.

Perhaps this ought not to surprise us. After all, scripture itself seems similarly ambivalent. The psalmist talks of Jahweh as being 'from everlasting to everlasting our God, for whom a thousand years are but as yesterday.' Yet elsewhere the prophet makes it clear that that same Jahweh is a God of change: 'Behold I am doing a new thing.' Some students cynically noted that second quotation was the motto of the Principal of the Theological College I attended! How do we pick our way through this labyrinthine maze of uncertainty, how can we see the wood for the trees? My guess is that one of the keys to an answer lies in the *focus* of change. As Lodge inimitably demonstrates, change is largely on the *human* scene. So, change might be in relation to birth control – the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* left a searing scar on the Roman Catholic Church and the Pope himself; that document was primarily about human behaviour. Or the change might be about doctrine. So, for example, Lodge writes:

'At some point in the nineteen-sixties, *Hell* disappeared. No one could say for certain when this happened. First it was there, then it wasn't. On the whole, the disappearance of Hell was a great relief, though it brought its own problems.'

So, guilt about sex evaporated with the disappearance of the fear of hell, as did much else. Some said that if there was no hell, then why worry about immortality? But at root so much of this talk of change issued from what one might call a new humanism. Humanism is a noble Christian term – it furnished the rooms of renaissance Europe. It prompted great art, poetry, music and philosophy. But it was *Christian* humanism; rooted in God, rooted indeed a God who was changing humanity, as St Paul so powerfully put it, 'into his likeness from one degree of glory to another.' This *new* humanism was different. It was characterised by an increasing introversion both individually and corporately, a sort of cosmic navel-gazing from which we have never escaped.

There *has* been vast change, then, but much of the ambivalence we feel is because it is rooted in looking at *ourselves and our world* and not at *God*. Let me give you an example of this creeping pejorative humanism: Just last month I was at a liturgical consultation (in my role as Chair of the Liturgical Commission). We sang many contemporary hymns. They often included good words, good melodies combined with noble thoughts – but they were all about *us* and not about God or about what God has done for us. They were well rooted in a doctrine of creation, but one with only a vaguely deistic creator who appears to have no interest in redemption.

Sadly, it is serious crises, as Sir James reminded us that move things on. Crises also often focus us again on *God* and God's power. As the Second World War was about to break out, the poet W. H. Auden was standing on the brink of a return to the faith in which he'd been nurtured. In the light of this, his poem *As I Walked Out One Evening* ends memorably:

“O look, look in the mirror,
O look in your distress
Life remains a blessing
Although you cannot bless.”

“O stand, stand at the window
As the tears scald and start
You shall love your crooked neighbour
With your crooked heart.”

It was late, late in the evening,
The lovers they were gone;
The clocks had ceased their chiming,
And the deep river ran on.’

Auden takes us to the *heart of change*. We look at ourselves in the mirror not just as individuals but as ‘a lump’ and we see our flaws, our imperfections. It convicts us to look out to others: ‘You shall love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart.’ But this happens not by *our* will but only through God's grace: ‘Life remains a blessing – although *you* cannot bless.’ It is God who blesses. The change is no less radical than the picture painted by Lodge's perceptive novels. The change *is* in religion, but the real change, the cosmic change, is wrought by God: ‘The clocks had ceased their chiming, And the deep river ran on.’

So the psalmist and the prophet come together. God is the unchanging one, the deep river running on, in whom all begins and all is redeemed. But God is equally eternally ‘doing a new thing.’ Paul crystallises this for us simply in that marvellous Colossian hymn about Christ:

‘He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created ... He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together ... He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything.’

Here is the new thing. As he continues later in the letter: ‘You have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.’ Or, as he says in that Corinthian passage to which I have already alluded: ‘And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed from one degree of glory to another: for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.’

We *are* the new wine and God had made the new wineskins.
Amen.

Readings:
Colossians 1: 15-20
Luke 5. 33-end