

What to leave behind?

We are coming to the end of Lent. Has Lent this year changed you in any way? Were you expecting to be changed? Or have we got so accustomed to these times in the church calendar that there is no “surprise” any longer? The days come and go, and all keeps going as usual. And then the readings for today touch our lives – to remember what was, to look forward to what is. Remember. Forget. What to forget? What to remember?

Spanish philosopher George Santayana is credited with the aphorism, “*Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it*”, and it seems we have seen plenty of this in recent times: the politics of the world, the politics of our country, the environment, social justice... Some people will say “We never learn, do we?” Does any of this help us understand what the readings for today are asking from us?

The past is past, by definition, and we are reminded that God does not stay anchored in the past; we are always reminded that there are still greater things ahead, and yet we can’t ignore the past, we can’t forget the past, BUT we can’t be ruled by the past. We are people on the way, and the way ahead is the way of the Kingdom.

The prophet Isaiah is speaking to people who are in exile, where they are losing all hope; all is lost it would seem, and God speaks reminding them of their past -the slavery in Egypt and the liberation that came – a way in the sea, a path in mighty waters. A timely reminder but having said that God surprises them (and us) when he adds: *do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing... I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.* Remember but don’t remember. Yes, that’s God for you. Things will be similar but not the same, because God is proclaiming yet even greater things ahead!

And the author of the letter to the church in Philippi reminds the people of his credentials – nobody could be better prepared than he was: circumcised on the eighth day; of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, persecutor of the early church, blameless. What more could be asked for, But all is loss for the sake of Christ, he regards all as rubbish, what is worth something lies ahead, not behind. And then, just two verses after the end of the reading today, we read: *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead...I press forward to the goal Christ Jesus.* Paul says that all that at one time meant something to him and others, no longer has a hold on his life, he has been freed to another goal: Jesus.

And here we stand at the crossroads as a church...was the past better than our present so we want to go back to that past? Is the present so uncertain that we see no future? Are we condemned to always repeat the past, because at least it gives us an identity? This is all dangerous territory. And God knows that – let us listen to Isaiah for a second: even when Exodus was the greatest event in the history of the life of the people of God, when they are in exile now, they don’t need to dwell on the past but hope for a new future, and God says he will be doing new things. And Paul says that he is giving up all the past for the future. This is the challenge.

At Immanuel we are at time where we must consider this challenge. Things we thought of as “there” are there no longer (at least as they were): coffee and tea after the service, luncheon club, concerns about the members who feel they can’t come back (yet), reduced participation in the choir... what can be done? who can help to do it? Who will feel the challenge to consider eldership? The article Steve wrote for the Partnership Magazine confronts us with some unquestionable realities...

None of this can be resolved only by the elders, only by the minister, only by a few people – it is the task for all of us, as church to think of those things we should leave behind and head to what is to come, something like Paul telling us what went on in his life... and then on Thursday one sentence in the meditation in “Fresh from the Word”: *in the midst of great fear and trembling and an uncertain future, there is one sure thing: God is with us – in the unexpected and the unfamiliar ‘new’, as much as in the old.* Or again, the thought for the week in the Weekly News.

At this time of Lent, we affirm our belief in life, life as God’s gift to us, and God will keep on telling us: “I know you by name, you are my child, and I love you”. Even when all seems finished, seems dead...God keeps on saying – lets look at what is coming, I still want to do new things with you.

Let’s take today as challenge for our future, one in which each and all of us are involved, even if in different ways, and break through the fences we have built up to “protect us” and venture on the way. I close with the words of the Psalm that called us to worship, with one slight alteration:

*When the LORD restored the fortunes of Immanuel, we were like those who dream. Then 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.’ The LORD has done great things for us, and we rejoiced... **And may the people of God say AMEN.***