

**The Times, They are A-Changin':  
Three Big changes in the faith we share.**

Readings: 1 Sam 8, 4 – 15; 16 – 20: The people want a king. Mark 3, 31 – 35: A close community.

*Today, we focus on deep change. In the Hebrew Scripture, it is about moving from a nomadic to a settled agricultural way of life. For that, you need a king. A heroic leader who will come thundering in to rescue us. The others have all got great leaders – we want one too. Someone to come to our rescue – to do it for us. The Hebrews got their king. Change this big always comes suddenly – and there are always unforeseen consequences – for better or for worse.*

*The very first Christians had expected the immanent return of Jesus. But Jesus did not return. So they had to sort out a structure for the faith. Often in story form. Often using such familiar analogies as the bread of life, the true vine, the sheepfold. The sayings, the aphorisms and the parables such as today's Gospel reading, are the very source of the tradition. From these, the structure of the early church was developed. Think of today's reading as giving legitimacy to the little groups of followers of Jesus: telling those first followers that they have a closeness which is stronger than that of sisters, brothers families. And so a structure and "theology" for the early church was begun.*

Not long after the time of our Gospel Reading, the classic Christian creeds were agreed upon. The first big change in life and faith was under way. Jesus hadn't returned as earlier expected, so his followers were forced to organize. The great Medieval Church evolved, culminating in the papal theocracy of Gregory the Great. This was massive change. From a small radical movement on the fringes of Judaism, itself on the fringes of empire, Christianity had become a central element in the mightiest empire the world had ever seen: a tool of empire, along with its other two tools: its armies and its bureaucracy – all to maintain imperial power and control.

A thousand years later, a second huge change came to Seventeenth Century Europe – the time that has come to be called "The Enlightenment" This period saw the rise of science, destruction of the classical proofs of God's existence, new studies showing how the Bible had been humanly constructed. Karen Armstrong sums these massive changes up in her great work "A History of God":

*By the end of the 16th century, huge changes were taking place in the West, leaving the East and Islam struggling in its wake. A key aspect of change was that the thinkers of the time ... "no longer ... needed to rely on inherited tradition, an institution, or an elite - or, even, a revelation from God - to discover the truth."<sup>1</sup>*

We have lived in a divided world – the aftermath of this massive change.

But the third change is now on the way: so vast it will dwarf the other two. It is being caused by a human footprint on the planet that is far too heavy: we are perturbing Earth's delicate balance of air and land and water. And doing so at a rate that the her systems cannot cope with, to maintain stability. Two words sum it all up: Climate change. The science is becoming ever more clear, and the scientists ever more strident in their calls for real action.

Now and again, a single book is a wakeup call, and a pointer to how we must deal with a very different world. Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" was such a book in 1964. Another appeared last year: Naomi Klein's "This Changes Everything." Klein explains why the climate crisis challenges us to abandon capitalism itself - the "free market" ideology of our time, abandon the idea of willy-nilly economic growth, restructure the global economy, and remake our political systems. We have a choice: either we embrace radical change ourselves or radical changes will be visited upon our physical world. The status quo is no longer an option. We simply have to stop digging and pumping stuff out of the ground, and burning it.

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Armstrong, "A History of God", 1999

Klein builds the case for how massively reducing our greenhouse emissions is our best chance to also reduce gaping inequalities that have appeared across so many cultures. She exposes the ideological desperation of the climate-change deniers, the messianic delusions of the would-be geo-engineers, And she demonstrates why the market has not—and cannot—fix the climate crisis but makes things worse, with ever more extreme and damaging extraction methods, accompanied by rampant disaster capitalism.

Klein argues that the changes to our relationship with nature and one another that are required to respond to the climate crisis humanely should not be viewed as grim penance, but rather as a kind of gift—a catalyst to transform broken economic and cultural priorities. And she documents the movements that have already begun this process: communities that are not just refusing to be sites of further fossil fuel extraction but are building the next, regeneration-based economies right now. I personally see changes this deep as amounting to a third spiritual change, on the same scale as those that happened when the Roman Empire hijacked Christianity, and again when the new discoveries of the Enlightenment changed the way we think. The little Gospel readings where we see the early church developing a mutually supporting, caring structure can guide us once again – but this time, on a planetary scale. No longer can the expansion of free-market capital (economic growth) alone be the major thrust of our culture. It must be reined in. The values of conservation, spirituality, neighbourhood, pacifism, and fair sharing must come to the fore, and quickly. Climate change is not only a threat – it is also an opportunity.

That's why the faith we have inherited is going to be so vital. At its best, it can promote altruism, a real concern for the welfare of all. At its worst, it retreats into the "we are the chosen few" mentality. We need to broaden it, grow it, stir into the mix insights from other faith traditions, while remaining true to the values of repentance and integrity we find in the life of Christ, and the style of that early church. Our society constantly tries to make us out to be just another sectional interest group like all the others. Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great New York Baptist preacher of the early 1900s, said *"Christians are supposed not merely to endure change, nor even to profit by it, but to cause it."* The big change we need to cause has to do with moving beyond sectional interests to concern for and stewardship of all creation. Pretty well all the public voices we hear today represent one sectional interest or another: bosses, workers, left wing right wing, this racial group or that one, rural sector, public sector, manufacturers, transport lobby, Aucklanders, beneficiaries, sensible sentencing, greenies, education sector, financial institutions, entertainment industry... the list goes on and on and on. We need to move beyond them all, in a spirit of Christ-like caring and Christian love.

For us, Christ is the cornerstone, the Good Shepherd, openly uniting Jew and Gentile and all traditions working for the common good. And challenging those ideologies that promote their self-interest, generating masses of dialectic jargon, behind a public face of rhetoric and propaganda. We are visioning and building on a broader scale towards a common good – the values of the faith we share. Not an easy task! Not a quick fix! Reinhold Niebuhr, in 1952 wrote:

*"Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime. Therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love."*<sup>2</sup>

Times, change, powers wax and wane, but "the light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not put it out." An informed and Christ-empowered church will remain a vital beacon of hope not just for this group or that group, but for the whole oikomene, the whole household of God.

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<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr; "The Irony of American History", 1952