

I wonder how you feel about change. Are you the sort of person who relishes something new or are you someone who likes the familiar, likes things to stay the same and finds that comfortable?

Everything changes and things move on. Sometimes that can be exciting and fresh and other times it can be quite disorientating and unsettling.

In the passage that we're looking at from Luke's Gospel this morning, we read some of the last instructions of Jesus (as they are recorded in Luke) to the disciples after the last supper. So although it's not evident to the disciples right at that moment, they are about to experience a huge change.

They've committed themselves to following Jesus. They've seen Jesus work miracles, teach in extraordinary ways and they've become part of a group with a new identity and a new sense of purpose. But the very next day that's going to come to a crashing halt when Jesus is put to death. Now there's much that goes beyond that - much that is new and exciting in the resurrection - but which they are not expecting at all.

So what were these things that Jesus said to them in that moment when they were about to face such change? He knew that he was leaving them and perhaps he wanted to equip them with some last words, some last thoughts, which would stand them in good stead. Let's see what he said.

First of all, there is the dispute about who will be the greatest and Jesus teaches them that they are not to lord it over one another for "the one who is greatest amongst you will be the least". That's a strange thought. We may be quite familiar with that now because we know it from the Bible, but at the time it would have been very strange.

Then he says to them, "you are those who stood by me in my trials and I confer on you a kingdom". That doesn't quite make sense either, that standing in trials and suffering leads to authority in a kingdom.

Then we have Jesus addressing Simon Peter directly and predicting his betrayal but also saying, "once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers". So even in predicting Peter's betrayal, Jesus is anticipating his restoration, his forgiveness and his ability to support the rest of the disciples. Again this may not be what we expect. Sometimes we might expect failure or betrayal to be the end of the road and to result in punishment and ostracism and disqualification from any ongoing service.

And finally he reminds them of what they did before. "When I sent you out did you lack anything - when I sent you out without a purse or a bag or sandals?" And they said, "No, not a thing." So they might well have been thinking, "Well, that's the pattern, we've learned our lesson, we've had that practical experience, Jesus has taught us how to follow him how to live well. We know what to do now so we'll be doing that again."

But he said to them, "but now the one who has a purse must take it and likewise a bag, and the one who has no sword must sell his cloak and buy one". So in other words, it's going to be different from before. It's not going to be the way it was before - now it's going to be different.

In all of those reversals - the unexpectedness of the greatest being the least and the restoration after failure and things being different from before - there is a message that we need to be ready for change. Things are not always going to be the way we expect them to be, or the way we would like them to be, or the way that makes sense to us, or even the way that they have been before. God is a God who does things in new ways and often unexpected ways.

That's a simple but profound truth which can be challenging to accept and to live with. Often it would be much nicer if things were always staying the same and familiar and comfortable for us.

I'm reminded of how C.S. Lewis cottoned on to this principle and how he illustrated it quite potently in one of his Narnia stories. Narnia is a fantasy world which probably represents the spiritual realm. Four siblings – Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy - enter into this realm and fight battles which represent spiritual battles. In the story of Prince Caspian they return to Narnia after a long absence and they are trying to find their way through the wood in order to get to the place they need to be. They are struggling to find their way. They think that Aslan might come and help them, as he did previously in Narnia, but on this occasion he does not. So they struggle on by themselves.

They get stuck trying to cross a deep gorge. At that point Lucy catches a glimpse of Aslan the lion who represents Jesus in the story, seemingly prompting them to go in a certain direction. But the others do not see him, and are unwilling to believe that Lucy has genuinely seen him. So they go off in a different direction, only to find their way blocked and to eventually return to the gorge. (This is the film version, by the way, slightly different from the original book.)

When Lucy points out the place where she saw Aslan and starts to go in that direction, a different path appears – one they had not seen before – and they are able to cross the gorge after all.

Safely over, they go to sleep for the night but Lucy awakes and is drawn into the woods by the apparent dancing of the trees. She is led in this way to a clearing and there is Aslan waiting for her. "Why did you not come and help us like before?" asks Lucy. Aslan replies, "Things never happen the same way twice."

In the way the story unfolds, there two key threads. One is that some of the children are finding it very hard even to see Aslan because they're not alert to where he might be and what he might be doing. The other is that all of them are expecting the same thing to happen as happened previously - for Aslan to come and help them at what they think is just the right time. They're perplexed and confused that he doesn't. Lucy has to hear a hard message from Aslan that things do not always happen the same

way twice. In fact later in the story Aslan does come to their aid but in a quite unexpected way and at a much more crucial moment.

The basic message that C.S. Lewis was offering us is that we cannot always expect God to work in the same way that we have known God to work in the past. So it can be rather ironic if we *do* expect God to work in a particular way. Christian history is full of groups of people who have experienced God working in a particular way and have tried to replicate the circumstances of that. They have carried on doing the same things over and over again assuming that if they do the same things God will work in the same way again.

We might be prone to doing that as well. If we've experienced something significant of God, there is always that chance that we will try and reproduce that for ourselves. We might do exactly the same things and perhaps sing the same songs or have the same type of service or go to the same places, thinking that is how we can be sure of experiencing God in the same way again. It is a hard lesson to learn that things are not always the same twice over. And it's particularly sadly ironic if it is our expecting God to work in one particular way - the way in which we've experienced God working in the past - that actually prevents us from seeing what God is doing now. We might fail to recognize God because we're looking for the wrong thing.

It's possible that this principle is apposite for us at the moment because we know that we are approaching change. Things have been very disrupted for us with the pandemic. The way in which we relate to each other and worship together as a church community has been severely affected by the pandemic restrictions. As those restrictions are lifted we're going to have to negotiate something new. We're going to have to go through yet more change.

There may be a tendency to want to go back to the way it was before - to assume that things are going to work in the same way as before and that God is going to work in the same way as before. That's understandable and it would be very comforting and reassuring if we could go back to how things have been familiar in the past. But the challenge of this passage from Luke's Gospel - the 'Last Words' of Jesus - is that we need to be ready for something different from what's happened before.

It's not that we choose to do something differently just for the sake of being different. But rather we recognise that God may work in a way which is different. So we need to be fostering our own sense of awareness and seeking after God and sensitivity to how and where God is active in order not to miss out on that, not to blind ourselves to it, not to make assumptions about how God is going to work in the future.

Now that can be quite unsettling. It could be quite nerve-wracking for some of us. I don't want to say that we have to put ourselves into a position of being uncomfortable. But whatever our perspective is on change and on new things going forward, let's make our main focus on looking out for God, seeking after God's presence, seeking to join in with where we see God at work in the world, without making too many assumptions about what that will look like. Let's not try and

reproduce something that God has done in the past but always be looking out for what God is going to do next.

Let's pray:

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for those last words of Jesus in Luke's Gospel in which he turned upside down many of the understandings and expectations of the disciples, and he made clear to them that what they needed to do next was something different from what they had done before.

As we emerge out of the pandemic restrictions and we face yet more change, help us to be sensitive to you.

Help us to really look for you eagerly and keenly and to discern what you are doing, without being blinkered or hindered by assumptions about what has happened in the past.

In your mercy Lord, help us all to negotiate whatever change is necessary and to be ready for the new things which you are doing.

In Jesus name we pray,

Amen.