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A Reflection

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ALL THINGS NEW

Isaiah 65: 17 – 25; Thessalonians 3: 6 -13; Luke 21: 5 -19

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of my hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

One of the awesome things about the Christian faith is that we believe that God is a creator, responsible for the universe and everything in it. In the words of the Apostles creed, I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth.

One of the recurring themes throughout the Bible is not only that God is a creator, but that ‘God makes all things new’. The old is continuously being made new.

The dynamic of ‘transformation’ lies at the very heart of the gospels. Transformation is always taking place even when we don’t notice it.

We believe that God making all things new.

When we commit ourselves to following Christ, our lives are transformed through the agency of the Holy Spirit, working on our character and shaping who we are.

We talk about leaving an old life behind or burying that old life in the water of baptism and rising to a new life.

There are numerous references to transformation throughout the New Testament.

Romans 12: 1-2 “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind”

2 Corinthians 5:17 “ If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation”

John 12: 24 “Unless a grain of wheat dies ...it cannot produce new life”

You may be able to look back on your life and see how far you’ve come since the day of your conversion. You have become a new creation. And the good thing is that God hasn’t finished with us yet.

Isaiah 65: 17 – 25

Isaiah 65 is one of my favourite passages because it’s about radical transformation.

It was written in the 6th century BCE during or following Israel’s exile in Babylon. You can imagine that there was an air of optimism and hope in the Jewish community.

Isaiah presents a dream-like, almost bizarre picture of Jerusalem restored.

‘God makes all things new’, is very much the theme of Isaiah 65.

Isaiah paints this beautiful picture of an idyllic world where the threats of danger and death and evil have all been removed.

It is a new world where natural predators have become friends. The wolf and the lamb. The lion and the ox. Only the serpent – the symbol of the devil – is punished or penalized. He must eat dust!

In the new Jerusalem God does not need to be invoked by prayer or sacrifice because God is ever-present and on hand like a faithful companion or loving parent.

The ideal world.

‘No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress. 20 No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. 24 Before they call, I will answer, while they are yet speaking, I will hear. 25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox; but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.’

Isaiah is describing a world transformed. A heavenly world where no one suffers and where God is a constant presence, who no longer needs to be invoked by prayer.

In one of my former parishes, I used to visit a man who was dying. One day he asked me if I believed there was a heaven. I don’t know why I thought of the passage from Isaiah, but I jokingly told him that if there is a heaven, it is a place full of vegetarians. And he asked, ‘what makes you say that?’

I said, ‘well if the wolf and the lamb are feeding together and the lion is eating straw like the ox – it means that the food chain must be broken – and everyone in heaven has gone vegetarian!’

My friend eventually passed away peacefully, surrounded by his wife and loving family.

At the funeral his wife told me that her husband had remembered our conversation about heaven, and the day before he died, he said to her – ‘when it’s your time to come to heaven – don’t forget to bring some meat!’

Dreaming of a better world is in the Judaeo-Christian DNA. Not only do we dream of a better life in the hereafter, but we also dream of making this world a better place.

We pray for that new world every week, or every day, 'may your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven'.

We believe that the world is transformed by prayer and that change comes about when we pray and work for the coming reign of God/kingdom of God. A reign that is here – and yet to come.

When we pray our prayers for others, we are praying for the best outcome for them. That God will be present with them whatever the outcome and we work towards that best outcome.

Today we dream of a world where love and justice prevail over selfish interests. Sometimes we need to speak the truth to power, even if it makes us unpopular.

Wouldn't it be nice to hear that peace is breaking out all over the world instead of more war and bloodshed.

Wouldn't it be nice to hear that women are no longer having to fight for equal rights with men.

As a person of colour and as one of that rare breed of human called 'Samoan', I dream of a world where there is no racial prejudice, and a world where there is no poverty or inequality.

As a New Zealander I worry about legislation that undermines the efficacy of the Treaty of Waitangi for instance. I dream of a world where the cultures and history of all races are respected and treaties made by ancestors are honoured in every generation.

Today, we are still dreaming of ways of making our world a better place. Here at St Columba's, we are still developing an identity as an eco-church and thinking of practical ways of partnering with nature, rather than dominating nature.

Thessalonians 3: 6 - 13

Our second reading is about the slow, everyday transformation which happens as we try to follow Christ in church communities.

Paul's Letter to the Thessalonian church offers down-to-earth practical advice to the new church about how to live in community.

Paul warns the community against idleness. In the Christian community everyone must pull their weight. If you don't work, you don't eat.

It is probable that there were Christians in Paul's time, and maybe even Paul himself, who believed that the Second Coming would happen in their lifetimes – so what was the point of working?

There were probably also Christians who suffered from what we call 'compassion fatigue' or 'empathy fatigue' and were feeling a bit burned out living in that tight-knit community in Thessalonica.

Paul urged them to 'never get tired of doing what is right.'

All very practical advice for any community – in the first century and in the 21st century.

Christian character is developed by living in community. We are transformed by interacting with other Christians. It is only in community that we learn how to forgive and how put the needs of others alongside our own needs.

Luke 21: 5 -19

Finally, our gospel reading is another passage of apocalyptic prophecy. Here, Transformation comes at the end of a series of catastrophes.

The Temple will be destroyed. False messiahs will rise up. Nations will go to war. Earthquakes and plagues will visit the earth. The newly formed Christian communities will be persecuted.

'7You will be hated by all because of my name. 18But not a hair of your head will perish. 19By your endurance you will gain your souls.'

But in the end, transformation will come about through suffering and endurance. **The apocalyptic nightmare will eventually give way to a new era – a new heaven and new earth.**

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus is credited with the saying:
"we never put our feet in the same river twice"

Life is always in a state of flux. Not only is the river changed, but we are also changed and changing. And that could be a tremendous blessing.

17 For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. 18 But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating;

PRAYER

God of endurance and mercy,
Who makes all things new.

You call us to live faithfully in the midst of turmoil,
to work with integrity and never tire of doing good.
Strengthen us to stand firm in the hope of your Kingdom,
to resist fear and falsehood,
and to bear witness to your love, with courage and grace.
Through Jesus Christ, our companion and redeemer,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever.

Amen.