**Luke 5:33-39**

**Holding the new in tension with the old**

UK Politics at the moment is fascinating, isn’t it? A bit scary to see how all the pieces will land, to be sure, but fascinating all the same. And one of the most fascinating aspects of it, for me anyway, is watching how all the political parties are grappling with the relationship between traditional, established systems and the demands of a new cultural reality.

The Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn is divided between those who want to embrace a traditional model of socialism born in the 18th- and 19th-centuries and those who believe that this model of socialism simply can’t work in a globalized society that is driven by a different economic and class system.

The Conservatives are similarly divided between those who believe a centre-ground position embraces traditional Tory values and those who believe a move to the right is the only way of upholding Toryism as a political force in this nation.

The Brexit Party is arguing that that traditional political model is broken and that it is time to give way to a new system that reflects a new reality and social order.

Change UK are arguing the same thing from a different position: that traditional politics is broken and that the new social order demands a new approach to governing.

There are fundamental, existential questions being asked of our democratic system right now, and no-one knows how it will all shake down and what, in 10 years time, we will be looking back on. This is a philosophical, existential debate about the relationship between traditional systems and the requirements of a new society.

And, of course, that debate is not limited just to the political sphere, and its not limited to just this current era of human society. It has been a constant question wherever we find organized human communities and not least in the church. Even in the time of Jesus, there was a debate raging about how this new religious worldview that would embrace the name Christianity should relate to the Judaism from which it was born.

And that debate about the relationship between the old and the new is at the heart of this Gospel reading from Luke 5:33-39 about the wine and wineskins, the new cloth and the old garment. So let’s give a bit of thought to this reading and see what we have to learn from it.

The context of this parable from Jesus is the fact that the Pharisees were criticizing Jesus after he attended a dinner with Levi the tax collector. They were unhappy that Jesus, as a religious leader, was spending time with someone who was such a hated figure; someone who was on the margins of their society. And so they were trying to find a way to catch him out.

And the line of attack that they took on this occasion was to critique his attendance at Levi’s dinner party when traditional religious practice suggested that he should do the exact opposite. In verse 33 of Luke 5, the Pharisees say this: “John’s disciples, like the disciples of the Pharisees, frequently fast and pray, but your disciples eat and drink.”

So the implication is that Jesus’ followers weren’t as spiritual as the followers of other religious leaders of the time. The implication is somehow that to be a follower of Jesus is lazy spirituality, pick ‘n’ mix spirituality, in which partying is OK because it’s fun, but the hard work of spiritual disciplines like fasting can be avoided.

And certainly the Pharisees were right to point to the importance of fasting as a spiritual discipline. It’s not something that we have thought much about in recent years at St. Andrew’s and maybe sometime soon we need to redress that balance. But it certainly was a key spiritual discipline at the time of Jesus.

Fasting happened in a number of different ways. Some Biblical characters went through prolonged fasts: Moses, Elijah, Daniel, and Jesus himself, are examples of that. Other people fasted on a weekly basis, like John’s disciples, the Prophetess Anna and Cornelius the Gentile. The Pharisees fasted twice a week and made sure that everyone knew about it because they would wear special clothes and make quite a show of it. They were still sincere in their practice – but took a completely different approach.

But here they wanted to catch Jesus out about why his disciples seemed to never fast but spent their time at parties and wedding receptions instead.

Well, Jesus is absolutely confident that he is teaching his disciples appropriately, and that confidence came out of a deep sense of self-identity: he knew who he was, and what was to come, and how he should shape the disciples in the light of that. In verse 34, Jesus says to them, “You cannot make wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them, can you?”

In those days, a wedding party would last for as long as a week and it would often be a riotous affair, certainly a great deal of fun. And a week-long party was not the type of event where you would want to be fasting! And likewise, the fact that Jesus Christ, the Son of God was in their midst was a cause for celebration, not fasting.

But, as he said in verse 35: “The days will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them, and then they will fast in those days” He knew that his crucifixion and death lay ahead…He knew that the time for fasting and mourning would soon be here…But in the meantime, the presence of Jesus, the Son of God, was a cause for celebration and rejoicing.

And in the light of that critique by the Pharisees about Jesus’ adherence to religious tradition, he then goes on to give this parable, outlining his teaching on the relationship between the new and the old. And from that parable, we are left to ponder two issues for ourselves today. The first is to do with our relationship, as a church, to tradition. And the second is to do with our own personal relationship with God in the context of our daily living. So let’s just briefly unpack these two issues.

Firstly, our relationship, as a church, to our historical traditions.

In this story from Luke’s Gospel, the Pharisees wanted Jesus to conform to their traditions but Jesus fully understood that he was about something new and that he was introducing a new understanding about God or, at the very least, reintroducing an old understanding that seemed to have got lost over the years. And he wants to get across the idea that the new way of doing faith is incompatible with the way in which the Pharisees were living out the ancient Jewish faith. So he uses two illustrations for this.

First, in verse 36, Jesus says, “No one tears a piece from a new garment and sews it on an old garment; otherwise the new will be torn, and the piece from the new will not match the old.”

If I have a hole in my jeans, it would not be very sensible to buy a new pair and then cut a patch out of the new pair and sew it onto the old pair. Who would do that? If I did that, I would have ruined the new pair of jeans and the old pair of jeans still wouldn’t last very long with a new patch on them. It’s completely the wrong way round of fixing something.

And Jesus says, so it is with faith in God. We can’t just take new ways of doing church and just plonk them on top of our traditional way of doing things because neither the old nor the new will work properly and everyone will remain unsatisfied. Something has to give…

And then Jesus makes the same point again by talking about the fermentation process in wine-making, in verse 37: “And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.”

Wine in Palestine fermented very quickly due to the warm climate. Wineskins were made of tanned goatskins and sometimes the skin would burst due to the gases produced in the fermentation process if the skin was too old to contain the new wine.

And again, that’s how it is in the church. Jesus had come with a radical new Gospel: empowerment of those on the margins of society, healing the sick, experiencing the fatherhood of God on a daily basis, mending broken hearts, forgiving others. His critique is that the man-made rules of the Pharisees was getting in the way of that with outward displays of piety that didn’t indicate an inward change of heart.

As I said earlier, this was a constant battle in the early church. In Acts 15, Paul grapples with the relationship between Jewish and Gentile believers. His letter to the Romans is built upon this same problem. His letter to the Galatians explores the place of Jewish rituals for Gentile believers. There was a constant battle going on, trying to understand how the rituals of faith should relate to the new teaching of Jesus Christ.

And the history of the church ever since has been littered with debate about how we can maintain our ancient traditions whilst being church in the current cultural context.

It is the key question at the heart of our Towards 2030 Mission Action Plan, and perhaps the deepest, existential question we face as a church over the next decade. How do we retain the beauty and majesty of our ancient building and the power of the Anglican tradition and yet still reach out to the community of Enfield in a way that works in 21st-century Britain? How are we going to hold in positive tension our 900-year history and yet also be a forward-looking, contemporary church community that addresses the very real needs of Enfield today?

Even the experiment that we are currently exploring, with some people staying in here for Sunday worship whilst others go to the Parish Centre, is a tangible expression of how we are trying to deal with this existential issue.

And the whole point of our Towards 2030 Mission Action Plan, and the whole point of Jesus and Paul are arguing for in the Bible, is not about getting rid of the traditions but how to carry on using them usefully in a way that will enhance the new and not get in the way of mission of the People of God. Jesus made that so clear in his Sermon on the Mount, where he said this: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.”

Jesus didn’t want to do away with Jewish ritualism. But he wanted it to recover the original intent, the original spirit of what it was for instead of being just tradition for tradition’s sake.

That is the balance we are working towards at St. Andrew’s.

It isn’t proving easy, and each one of us are called to compromise in some ways. But I hope that we are all confident in the good intent behind our Mission Action Plan, that we are trying to hold together what is good from contemporary culture in such a way that the traditions from the past can support our mission and be reinvigorated with a sense of their innate spirituality. And anything, new or old, that gets in the way of that process has to be abandoned.

So this relationship between tradition and new forms of faith is an important part of understanding the meaning of this parable. But I don’t think it’s the whole story. Because I think Jesus is also calling us to examine our own lives and think about how we relate to God and the Christian faith on a daily basis.

For many people, it seems that the Christian faith and church activity is some sort of add-on to a lifestyle that remains fundamentally unchanged. Many people will come to church on a Sunday or say that they are Christians but without ever really allowing the Gospel message and the Holy Spirit to transform how they behave, what they say, how they relate to others, and how they prioritize their lives.

And I think that Jesus is saying here that it is impossible, really, to live like that.

It comes down to the most basic of questions: what does it mean to be a Christian?

Well, being a Christian is not defined by coming to a building once a week or singing some hymns, or listening to a sermon, or being involved in a church group.

Being a Christian is defined by living in a relationship with God: a transformative relationship in which we submit ourselves to his Holy Spirit and allow the Holy Spirit to work in us to change us as people so that we can live out our calling as children of God.

And so, if we are Christians, we will want to read the Bible more, we will want to pray more because this is how we hear from God and grow in a relationship with him. If we are Christians, who know the love of God for ourselves, we will want to tell other people about him so that they can know God’s love for themselves. If we are Christians, we will want to show love to others in the most practical, servant ways, putting the needs of others before ourselves.

Being a Christian is about submitting to God in every aspect of our being. We don’t always get it right, and we are on a journey into wholeness and holiness. But the intent should be there within us to submit to the power of God at work in our lives.

That is how the Christian life is lived out.

And so in this parable, Jesus is challenging us, I think, by stating that we cannot carry on living in the old ways, with our old habits and sort of stick Jesus on like a Band-Aid or Plaster. The tension and stress of trying to live like that is too much.

I remember having a really good conversation with someone about this because he was really struggling with it. He wanted to carry on with their lifestyle of heavy partying, occasional drug-taking, and generally living for himself - but he was also a Christian and wanted to live as a follower of Jesus too. And he described the tension to me like this. He said, “I feel like I have too much of God in me to enjoy my old life and too much of my old life in me to enjoy God”. He was feeling paralyzed, in a halfway state, and he knew that full happiness and joy would only be his when he chose fully for God.

Perhaps some of us may be living in that state of tension too.

So we are called to question ourselves: Are we trying to sew Christianity onto our lives, like a patch on our old way of living, or are we resolved to live a completely new life in submission to God? Are we trying to pour the new wine of a relationship with God into the wineskin of our old habits and attitudes? If we are, something is going to give, something will break, and we will be left with neither the satisfaction of a much-loved wineskin or the delicious taste of the new wine.

Much better it is to submit ourselves to God as our Lord and King and invite the Holy Spirit fully into our lives so that he can work his transformation within us. That is where peace and joy and fullness of life is to be found.

So in conclusion, then, we note that life is often about living in that tension between the much-loved systems and structures and behaviours of the past whilst trying to look meaningfully towards the future. It has always been thus; in faith, in politics, and wherever human society is built. We want to hold on to what is good from the past but reinvigorate the spirit of our traditions with the new wine of a relationship with God.

And, in our own lives, we need to seriously examine who we are and how we live and, with honesty, recognize that we cannot pour the new wine of God into the old wineskins of ungodly habits, thoughts and behaviours.

What is needed in our church and in our individual lives is nothing less than a complete transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit at work within us so that we become the people, the church, that we are destined to be.

As Jesus says, so simply, in verse 38: “New wine must be put into fresh wineskins”.

So we invite the Holy Spirit to take us and shape us and renew us in body, mind and spirit so that we can be filled with the new wine of the love of God.