

## **SERMON: EMBRACING THE NEW**

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Bible Readings: Isaiah 43: 14-21 | Philippians 3: 12-15

A man came home one day and was most upset with his wife because she had changed the furniture around in the house. His wife said, "What's the matter honey, I thought as a man who likes to be progressive and who doesn't mind change that you would be welcoming of this new setting?" To which he replied, "Yes, I am progressive and I don't mind change provided that everything remains the same." I suppose that when we search the depths of our hearts and when the time of true testing comes, we are very much the same. We have these 'soul conversations' with ourselves embedded with confusion and wrestle as we ponder on what we think is right and needed and with what we really want. The idea of separation, loss and disconnection from what makes us feel secure and comfortable is often too difficult to embrace.

In Isaiah 43 God is in a conversation with the people of Israel. A people who, no doubt, had tasted of his Glory, witnessed his miracles, and come to know of his majesty and power as he separated the seas, dealt with unjust leaders and provided for his people. The exodus from Egypt was an amazing and awesome event and the deliverance from Babylon was equally a great one. But if the truth be told the people of Israel had not seen anything yet. Therefore God invites the people of Israel to "See, I am doing a new thing!" In this passage in Isaiah 43 God is calling the people of Israel to embrace his "new thing". It is not only an invitation but it is an act of grace. Grace upon a people who continually resist God's will. Grace upon a people who desire to 'go back to Egypt' rather than to trust God and move forward. Grace upon a people who in spite of their disobedience and attempts to carve a God according to their own desires would nevertheless see God's new thing. This new thing would be greater and better than what they ever encountered in Egypt or Babylon. It would be the redemption of Christ. But is Israel able to perceive this 'new thing' that God is doing?

Our readings today tell us 4 things that we need to do to 'perceive or see' the new thing God is doing. What are they?

**We must forget the former things**

This call to 'forget the former things' can be seriously misunderstood. It is not a call to erase, deny, or suppress one's memory of the past. Such a view would be inconsistent with scripture in which there is a constant call to remember. The prophets repeatedly called on people to remember what God did in their days of struggle, difficulties and disobedience. The Apostle Paul tells us to remember what our lives were outside of Christ and now what we have become in Christ. To remember is a sacred responsibility. The call to forget must be seen in its context.

In Isaiah 43 God tells the people of Israel to forget the former things he did for them and to now focus on the new thing God is doing. In Philippians 3: 3 Paul speaks about 'forgetting what is behind'. This verse must be read in full to understand what he is really trying to say. He continues "forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead. " Paul's past was not the best. In fact he worked consciously against Christ, persecuting and tormenting Christians at all cost until, of course, his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus. That changed everything for him. In his own words (3:8-9) "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ." Imagine if Paul dwelt in the past saturated with guilt and shame. Instead, having repented, he chose to focus on his relationship with Christ and his glorious future with God. If we stay in the past – if we keep doing the same things – we will not move forward to where we need to be.

In our journey of transformation in South Africa we often turn to the past to help us direct the future and to not make the same mistakes again, in the words of Nelson Mandela "Never again". The Maori people of Aotearoa New Zealand have a saying: 'The future is behind us.' It is out of sight, beyond the field of vision. It cannot be seen so there can be no clear insight into what the future holds for us. The other side of this remark must therefore be: 'The past is in front of us'. It implies that it can be seen, analysed and understood to a degree. The future can only be seen through the past which can be examined. The past must be investigated in order to understand the present and prepare for the future. So whilst the past is important to remember, it is not appropriate to get stuck in it whether good or bad. Learning from the past we must move on to embrace a new future of possibilities, renewal and hope.

Last year our Faculty celebrated our centenary. We realize that our history is marked with both pride and regrets. We are proud of the contributions we have made to theological education, training and research in South Africa, Africa and further abroad. However, we are also mindful that we have supported and even theologically justified apartheid. We realize that in our attempt to 'forget the former things' we are not called to bury our experiences under a carpet and move on as if everything is well nor are we expected to get stuck there. Instead we have to confess and reinterpret the past and be open to the new things that God is doing amongst us. That leads me to my next point.

## **We must embrace the new thing**

Being *open* to new things and *embracing* new things are two different things. Many people are open to new things but fail to embrace them. We are open to new ways of thinking and living but we prefer things to remain the same. It is easier and comfortable not to change.

Friends, God is always doing a 'new thing' among us. The kingdom or rule of God is about the breaking in of God's power and presence. It is an indication that justice will prevail, sin will be overcome, darkness will turn into light, good will triumph over evil and God will be God, forever! God is busy renewing, restoring and transforming the world. God invites us to participate in this plan to heal, reconcile and transform this world. God invites us to embrace the new thing God is doing.

It is often not easy to choose the way of God. The people of Israel show this at regular intervals as they forget the deeds of their glorious Yahweh. Their reason for forgetting is simply this, they are driven by their desires and wants rather than focusing on what God wills. They are self-focused rather than God-centered. Yes, we all have this kind of 'Gethsemane struggle', places in which we must decide between what we want and what God wills. In this time of lent, we realize that even Jesus struggled with the same when he said "Father, take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet not as I will but your will be done." Embracing God's new thing requires looking at things God's way and not ours. It requires willful obedience and a sense of preparedness to not get our way.

I am reminded of the prophet Jonah who wanted to do God's will Jonah's way and God had to wrestle with Jonah until God got God's way. Jonah realized that he had to submit to God's new thing. He did and Nineveh was saved but the story ends with the sulking prophet still wanting it his way. Perhaps this indicates the continued struggle God still has with us in getting us to embrace God's new thing. God still stands before us and says "See, I am doing a new thing. Do you not perceive it?"

God has been busy with us as a Faculty. We have over the years come a long way. The fact that I am the first person of colour to be appointed Dean of the Faculty a hundred years later speaks for its self. It is a lovely indication that we have started to embrace the new thing that God wants to do amongst us, in us, with us and through us. This new thing is a joyful thing. It is a future filled with renewal, hope and possibilities. God invites us to joyfully embrace the new thing God is doing.

## **We must Press on**

In Philippians 3 verse 12 Paul states "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

We all know that Paul achieved a great deal. It is because of him that we know so much about the Christian faith. We have seen the radical transformation in Paul's life since his Damascus conversion and encounter with Christ. Yet Paul tells us here that he is not quite there. He has not arrived. He must continue to press on. It seems that since Christ has grabbed him now Paul must keep grabbing Christ. So the Apostle uses this athletic metaphor of straining and stretching toward Christ. Christ has done it all for him and now Paul needs to appropriate this by living for Christ, becoming what Jesus wants and wills for him to become.

We celebrate the many achievements that we enjoy at our Faculty. In the recent QS Report we have been named as the number 1 Faculty of Theology and Religion in Africa and number 4 in the world beating some very prestigious institutions abroad. We are grateful that this smallest Faculty at UP is able to still sustain itself financially mainly through its research outputs and postgraduate success. We have a very high standard of teaching and learning and we enjoy good support from our partner churches. We have recently changed the name of our Faculty to the Faculty of Theology and Religion, a further indication of inclusivity as we try to dialogue and research with people of other faiths. We have opened the gate and it stays open to indicate that we would not exclude others again. This powerful centenary theme of the "open gates" lives with us. We have succeeded in bringing our partner churches together in commitment to unity in our Christian witness in South Africa. We have much to celebrate and give thanks for, and we thank Prof Johan Buitendag for his visionary and courageous leadership. But we know that we have not yet arrived. We have to keep straining and pressing on.

There are many areas in which we must still stretch forward. We have to continue to address issues of diversity, inclusivity, transformation, employment equity, gender imbalances, contextual and relevant research, curriculum transformation, Africanisation, the use of language and financial sustainability. We have to take seriously the demographics in our country and the changing profile of our student population in the Faculty. We cannot have a situation in which the community changes but everything else remains the same.

Once I was invited to preach in a church that was predominantly white in its membership but by then it had changed to become about 90% black. However, the entire liturgy, hymns and service was exactly what it would have been 20 years ago. I asked the Pastor why they didn't sing in a back language or even cater for black folks. He responded that they never thought about it. The community changed but the content didn't.

It is so easy to continue with business as usual often not considering how we continue to exclude others. God is a God of inclusivity. God invites all people to come to him. God's grace and salvation is never given to a selected few. In the Old Testament God had a special relationship with the people of Israel but it was always with a vision of the *pars pro toto* – from the one to the many others. As Paul pressed on to reach his goal in Christ so must we. Our faith should give form and effort to understanding and transformation.

## **We must claim the prize**

Paul says “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

For Paul the obvious prize is to gain Christ; to make Christ his life in fullness.

We need to keep pursuing the call of Christ for: unity, peace, justice, reconciliation, righteousness, and joy. We cannot remain content where we are. There is more to do and so much more to be and become. Yet we cannot do this by ourselves. We need the Holy Spirit to help us, change us, empower us, convict us and sanctify us. We need the Holy Spirit to help us to embrace the new thing God is doing. Left on our own we will not succeed.

Paul used the athletic metaphor to state that we must ‘win the prize’. Let me use a picture more appropriate to our context. We say a warm welcome to our first year students and to all our returning and postgraduate students. For our first years, coming to university can be a completely different and overwhelming experience from your school environment, home experience and background. You may be challenged and stretched beyond your comfort zones. Being at university can be a huge culture shock. Yet you are here. You are here to win the prize. In this sense right from the first year until the end the prize you are working for is that certificate that says you have achieved that degree or diploma. Although this is the ultimate goal, I hope it would be much more than that. I hope it would be a journey of personal transformation and growth. I hope that the teaching and learning you receive and the research you engage would take you out of your comfort zones, help you to unlearn some of the things you’ve grown up with, help you to embrace diversity and learn from others, especially those different from yourself.

God says “See, I am doing a new thing!” As God invited Israel to embrace his “new thing” God also invites us to embrace the new thing God wants to do with us in this country, university and in particular the Faculty of Theology and Religion. God is calling us to forget the former things, to embrace his new thing, to keep on pressing on and to claim the prize in Christ Jesus. The question is: “Are we willing to embrace the new thing God is doing?”

Once there was an old wise man who often shared his wisdom with people in a small rural village. People would gather around him with their questions and he would give them the most profound answers. One day a young university graduate returned home, and trying to out stage the wise man he asked him a question. He said, “Sir, I have here a bird in my hand at my back. Can you tell me whether it is dead or alive?” This was a real trick question because had the old man said it was dead he would raise his hands and let it fly. Had he said it was alive, he would have simply wrung its neck and said, “See you are wrong, sir.” The wise old man thought for a moment as the crowd waited for a response. The old man gently looked up and said, “Son the answer to that question lies in your hands.”

God is calling us to embrace God's new thing: "See, I am doing a new thing among you". How would you choose to response to God's invitation? The answer to this question lies in your hands.