

Change

Sunday 26 July 2009 – Dr Richard Colegrove
Ephesians 2:4-22

Christ was born into a time of tremendous political and social change. Roman power was declining, Greek philosophy was having profound influence and all kinds of ideas, and sects were interacting in the Middle East and competing for peoples' allegiance. I want to talk about change in terms of the ministry of the Apostle Paul, and then relate that to us. His letter to the Ephesians is one of the high points of the New Testament. In Paul's ministry to the fledgling Christian Churches, he, more than anyone, had to give advice, and sort out problems. Sometimes the differences and divisions were held strongly and threatened the very nature of the Church. Paul, with his background as the most orthodox of Jews and a highly trained Pharisee, was uniquely qualified for such a vital role.

In the Ephesian Church the issue was over the admission of Gentile believers, and how they should be recognised by the Jewish believers. Paul emphasises both the continuity between God's work of redemption under the Old Covenant of Abraham & Moses, and what God has now been doing in His Son, Jesus Christ : and what for the Jews was the staggering implication of the New Covenant in Christ. They had assumed for 1000 years that they and they alone were God's chosen people, with a special and exclusive relationship to the one true God. But here was Paul, a Pharisee of Pharisees, coming among them and saying that this concept had been entirely broken open. God had now actually come among us in the Person of His Son. *God was in Christ reconciling all people to Himself.* Yes, under the Old Covenant He had rescued His chosen People from slavery in Egypt, but this was just a forerunner of the bigger plan – and while there is a continuity in God's plan in the past, this has now been broken in to offer salvation to all people in the much greater New Covenant that has come about in Christ. And indeed, this is what had been predicted by the prophets. *God has abolished the enmity (between Jews and Gentiles), for He Himself is our peace, and has united both groups in one body, and has broken down the dividing walls and barriers, making us all one new person, so establishing peace, and has reconciled us all in one Body to God through the Cross.*

At Corinth, There were disputes over leadership, and over food sacrificed to idols, and about whether women or men should cover their heads in church, but a bigger issue was over the use of the supernatural gifts of the Spirit (*charismata*) and Paul had to bring correction here to say that all God's people are gifted in some way. The gifts of God's people are not to be compared against one another: there should be no rivalry or competition, either in leadership or the gifts – all God's people are gifted people: and whether the gifts were spiritual or material, all are to be shared for the building up of the Body of Christ, in the spirit of reciprocal love and faith. Now these were radically new ideas to the Jews, and raised a lot of opposition. On more than one occasion Paul's very life was threatened.

Paul uses a most significant word in both these letters. He speaks of **reconciliation**. (i) The reconciliation of people to God, (ii) of people to people, and (iii) reconciliation within the hearts and souls of individual people in order to find true freedom. The concept of reconciliation is absolutely central to Paul's understanding of the Gospel. (2 Cor 5:14f) *For the love of Christ constrains us: He died for all, that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for Him who died and rose again on our behalf. Therefore if anyone is in Christ he is a new creature (species): old things have passed away: new things have come. And all these things are from God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.*

Today we also live in times of astonishing change, and this change is accelerating at an astounding pace. Let me illustrate. Millions of years ago it was biological evolution that was accelerating. Ten thousand years ago it was the development of agriculture: a century ago it was

the industrial revolution: today it is information technology (IT) that is pushing change and development faster and faster. As a result, many of us are living in the fast lane, some in over-drive. Personally, I find it difficult to keep up with my grandchildren ! The accelerating change is also profoundly affecting our environment. World population expands and outstrips our ability to clothe, house and feed it. Our waste is pouring into the air, the soil and the oceans. Forests are disappearing at an alarming rate, and holes have appeared in the ozone layer, along with the extinction of many of earth's vegetable and animal species. Grinding tectonic plates and volcanoes cause earthquakes and tsunamis. Seldom in history has the planet been in such a period of change. At the same time, while we now have revolutionary new knowledge of our universe and of mankind's place in it, yet we seem to lack the wisdom in applying it. Some of the scientists perceive this and are researching the nature of human consciousness, as perhaps the only element which is eternal. And this research in fields like micro and cellular biology, neurology, and philosophy - extends to what the Church has traditionally referred to as the fundamental issues of the spirit, in both Western and Eastern theology. It seems possible that there may be a growing convergence here which could be of supreme importance. But it seems to me to be ironic that this vital field of enquiry is being led by the scientists & philosophers, rather than church.

The question arises, how far can this accelerating cycle of change go ? I seriously suggest that unless the next quantum leap is a spiritual one, there is every likelihood that without some divine intervention, we as a species will destroy ourselves.

Change often comes as challenge: even as conflict. Probably most of us prefer to avoid conflict. Yet sometimes it is necessary to challenge old comfortably accepted ideas with new or perhaps the recovery of old insights. *But either way it is the people who think differently who change the world.* In the Bible account from beginning to end, we see this tension between the old and the new. And in the early Christian Church there was a succession of schisms and sects. All through Church history there has been debate and division, political intrigue and even war. We stand in the Protestant or Reformed Tradition: Our roots came out of the challenge to defend the priority of scripture as the revealed word of God, over the changing traditions and philosophies of man, and the corruptions that had crept into the Church. Reformation came about because brave men and women of unshakable faith believed that God's Word reflected the authority of God Himself. *Salvation was totally the work of God and we are justified or made righteousness, solely by God's grace.* Paul emphasises that good works follow faith. Again, all that caused huge reaction, debate and opposition. .

The critical issue for the Church today, as in the Reformation and perhaps always, is *whether the Church should be subject to the Scripture, accepted and applied, as the Word of God, or whether it should accommodate itself to human desires and the shifts of public opinion.* Are we in a time-warp of the past or are we open to seeing both a continuity from the past to new dimensions and applications of age-old truth? What is it of the past that is of abiding value in every period of history and in every culture? Our Judeo-Christian tradition is the only world religion that acknowledges the enormity of the real moral brokenness in the human personality, which we are seeing breaking out afresh today. And it is the uniqueness of Christianity which alone can offer a true diagnosis and a remedy for this fatal flaw.

Change is universal : outside the love of God in Christ, change itself is about the only thing that doesn't change. From the galaxies of the universe even to the cells in our bodies, there is birth, death and regeneration. Today, much of the Church continues to celebrate the Season of Pentecost which continues right through until November 15th – something over a third of the year. And quite rightly so, because in recognising our own impotence, we continue to reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit and to call upon Him to work with His divine might, and even through us, weak as we are. We need the Spirit in our own lives, to heal us and make us whole and holy: to renew our spirits, to encourage, to guide, to direct and to empower us. We need nothing less than a new revival - a new Reformation of the Spirit - and that not just for ourselves, but that we may be re-energised in this ministry of reconciliation to the world around us. We need a new sense of the majesty and glory of God, we need a deeper faith to believe that God can and will act in marvellous

ways, even through us: we need a deeper understanding and commitment to the truth of His Word.

Today, the Church of Jesus Christ is under attack from two fronts:-

- (i) We are commonly regarded in our culture as hopelessly outdated in our thinking and therefore as irrelevant in the life of our nation or
- (ii) We are being attacked from within, by those who would adulterate the plain Word of God – those who have been infected by the world's wisdom and its pride and are accommodating its values.

When Martin Luther came before the royal convocation in the city of Worms on April 18, 1512, and was told to recant his teaching about '*Justification by Faith Alone*', he said with great clarity. "*Unless I am refuted and convicted by the testimonies of the my conscience is bound by the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything against my conscience. Here I stand, I can do no other*"

And what could we begin to say of John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer? A French galley-slave for 19 months: in voluntary exile for some 10 years, and for about five years, a minister of the English Church. The Presbyterian Church in NZ was founded by those Reformers from Scotland who wanted to make a fresh start, free from the complications and contradictions of the English political and ecclesiastical establishment. And many settled in Dunedin and made a profound impact on the settlement here.

There are times – especially times of radical change: when the Christian conscience has to rise up and declare itself. Its not that human reason is always wrong: it can obviously be very valuable. But the problem is that human wisdom is fallible, and is not a sufficient reason for believing anything about God. Because only God is adequate to witness to Himself ! Therefore our faith is not based on human reason: it is based on the self-revelation of God in Christ, rather than the conflicting and changing speculations of mankind. Paul says explicitly in several places that our faith should not stand in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. We are told time and again to discern the difference between the will of God and the changing fads and opinions of men, and the whole Bible concludes with a very severe warning that we are not in our own wisdom to dare to add to the Word of God, nor take away anything from it.

So we have this dilemma. How do we face the present crisis in our society ? What are we to do ? I suggest that the Gospel of reconciliation must be vigorously proclaimed in *both word and deed*. And in this we need above all else the discernment and sensitivity of the Spirit. I am reminded of a particular incident in a Church Synod, while some 300 people spent days dithering on things of little consequence, when an older lady was invited to tell us about her work as a missionary nurse for 20 years in the slums of Suva. It was a moment of clarity for the synod. She spoke about the years of visiting people who lived in the most primitive conditions, and for whom nobody else cared. She had quite inadequate medical and physical resources, but she always was patient and kindly, and ministered to the best of her ability. After many years, one of her patients asked her, "*How is it that you continue to care for us, when no-one else does; and when we come back again and again, when we don't really deserve it*". It was only then that she shared the word of Christ's offer of salvation, - and the response of that person to the Spirit of Christ was immediate. It was God's time. That occasion was some 40 years ago, and I have never forgotten it. And the through this dear woman, the Spirit of God spoke again to the people present in that Synod, in absolutely clear and unmistakable terms and brought them back to reality.

I think of another occasion when as the pastor of a flourishing church, the leadership of the parish and I decided we would visit the parents of our Sunday School children – who mostly never came near the church and looked on it as a baby-sitting service. After much prayer and preparation before we set out. It was an almost unheard of thing to do in a very traditional Anglican Church. I happened to call on the middle-aged wife of a publican, and shared the simple gospel with her. Her response was to burst into tears.... '*Why hasn't anyone told me this wonderful thing before now ?* I put my arms around her and led her in the sinner's prayer, and with great joy she received Christ into her heart. It was God's time, and through God's Spirit.

We need to develop the capacity to listen to the Spirit of God and follow His leading. We need to be ready to share the word of faith and the testimony of the reconciliation that we ourselves have received. If we do that we need have no fear of the outcome: it is in God's hands, and who knows, it might change a life, a family, a community, even a nation

Our prayer is that God will do what only He can do: and He will empower us to do what only we can do. Mankind cannot solve its own problems: we need a Saviour. Albert Einstein said, '*No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it.*' We must reach out patiently for the divine power of the Spirit, to do the divine work of reconciliation in changing people's hearts and minds, and cause us to speak entirely naturally of what He has done in our own lives. – *Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to give account to everyone for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence.* (1 Pet 3:15)

Ephesians 1:13-14 O God, you have committed us the word of reconciliation. Graft upon our hearts Paul's words: *For those of you who have heard and believed the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation, you have been sealed in Christ with the Holy Spirit who is given to you as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God's own possession, to the praise of His glory.*