

14 March 2021

West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

By: Rev Drs Nanda & André Groenewald

Reading: Matthew 9:14-17

Hymn: MP 544 Open my eyes that I may see

Holy Communion

READING

Matthew 9:14-17

¹⁴ Then John's disciples came and asked him, 'How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?'

¹⁵ Jesus answered, 'How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast.'

¹⁶ 'No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. ¹⁷ Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out, and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved.'

MESSAGE

I often get asked why we decided to settle in Scotland. Because: How can someone who grew up in the warm and sunny South Africa, survive the Scottish winters?

And then I just tell them that there are many benefits to the cold: I think the snow can be absolutely magical, there is nothing like a long walk in

nature on a crisp winter's day, and there are almost no creepy crawlies here!

I really don't like insects, apart from a butterfly of course! I mean, who doesn't like a butterfly, with its pretty wings? But this most beautiful of all the insects (in my opinion) starts off as a creepy-looking caterpillar. This caterpillar then forms a chrysalis, where the transformation to the stunning butterfly takes place.

Now how amazing is that?

Our West Lothian Zoom Presbytery meeting this month was opened by the Rev Julia Wiley, and she told us that a butterfly came into her manse on Boxing Day, seeking shelter against the wet and windy weather. It stayed there for a few days and then disappeared, only to come back again some time later.

And in this stressful time of a global pandemic, something so simple became a sign of hope to Julia.

Who knows, maybe this time of lockdown can be seen as our time in our cocoons, a time of transformation and change...

So why don't we use this time to work on ourselves, on our relationship with God, so that we can emerge as who God wants us to be?

Let's use this time of being locked in the darkness, to transform ourselves into something truly beautiful. Let's become new people.

After all, it doesn't work to mix the old and the new, as we've heard in our Bible reading this morning.

John's disciples wanted to know why they and the Pharisees fasted, but Jesus and his disciples didn't? I can almost hear the accusation in their voices as they said that.

They were doing their best to be as pious as possible, and now the man who was claiming to be God's son and his followers were not even following the religious customs! That made them quite angry.

Let me quickly give you some background information about the custom of fasting. In Old Testament times people only fasted for one day a year – the day of atonement – but after the exile fasting became more popular, so much so that in New Testament times, the Pharisees fasted twice a week – every Monday and Thursday.

“Fasting” meant to not eat for a certain period of time, to communicate something to others. It had the purpose of self-humiliation, of asking for assistance from others or God. It was basically a form of ‘mourning’ the presence of evil.

Jesus answers them by referring to the metaphor of a wedding feast, where he is the groom and his followers (the church) the bride. In that society, mourning at a wedding would be a grave insult, because it would indicate that the wedding and those involved in it were evil.

Jesus is trying to explain to them that a new time has started. The customs they followed so religiously were nowhere near as important as his presence among them. This was a time to celebrate, not to mourn.

In Jesus God came among his people, but unfortunately, some of them were so focussed on their religious observance, that they lost track of who they were serving in the first place.

Jesus then explained this to them by making use of 2 examples that meant the exact same thing.

(1) No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse.

Old clothes have already shrunk in the wash, but if you were to repair a hole in an old piece of clothing, you can't use brand new fabric for this. Because the 1st time you wash it, the new patch will shrink, and tear the clothes even further.

People in the 1st century Mediterranean world never wasted anything. They had limited goods, and I'm pretty sure that they would have been quite shocked at this example, because in those days nobody would even consider making a silly mistake like this, because wastefulness was frowned upon big time.

It wasn't like today where we just throw things away and buy new ones – that was completely unheard of.

Absolutely nothing was ever wasted.

(2) So obviously, the same was true in regards to wine. Wine was stored in containers made of animal skins. New wine would expand as it fermented, stretching its wineskin with it. But then, over time, this wineskin would dry out and lose its ability to stretch, and if new wine were poured into old skins, these skins could crack and burst open.

Wasting not only the wine, but the wineskin too. Something that nobody would ever do.

So, by making use of a very common, simple, everyday example, Jesus is explaining to his listeners that the new and the old don't go together.

They would never even *consider* pouring new wine into old skins, or mending old clothes with new fabric, so why would they feel it's important to keep the old religious customs alive in this new time?

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What does all that mean to us today?

During this time of lent we are remembering that Jesus came to earth to make everything new. He walked a long road of suffering, spent 3 days in a grave – like a cocoon – and he emerged triumphant.

Our faith in Jesus makes us all new people too. Our old sinful selves died with him, and now we can live as kingdom people, joyously celebrating the fact that we belong to God for evermore!

So let's never fall back into old ways. Let's live like the new people we are:

- People who don't keep record of wrongs done to us – but people who forgive and forget.
- People who don't retaliate – but people who turn the other cheek.
- People who don't only do what is expected of us – but people who walk the extra mile.
- People who can experience joy even when we are worried or sad, because we realise that pure joy is not dependent on our circumstances, but on our relationship with God.

Let's use all this extra time we now have, while we are locked up in our lockdown cocoons, to work on all these qualities, so that once we are allowed to go out into the world again – we can spread our beautiful wings and fly...

None of this is easy through.

So let's humble ourselves before God now as we share in Holy Communion, remembering that we are not alone; that Jesus went before us to make our paths straight.

And let's not waste a second. In Jesus God made us all new. We belong to him. Let's show the beauty of this to the whole world, like stunning, colourful butterflies, making a difference wherever we go, with the Holy Spirit as the wind beneath our wings.

Amen

HYMN

MP 544

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free

Silently now I wait for thee
Ready, my God, thy will to see
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my ears, that I may hear
Voices of truth thou sendest clear;
And while the wavenotes fall on my ear
Everything false will disappear

Silently now I wait for thee
Ready, my God, thy will to see
Open my ears, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Open my mouth, and let me bear
Gladly the warm truth everywhere;
Open my heart and let me prepare
Love with thy children thus to share

Silently now I wait for thee
Ready, my God, thy will to see
Open my heart, illumine me, Spirit divine!