

MARK 2:18-28
A NEW WAY OF THINKING

Let me introduce you to Lay Peng. I met him 5 years ago when I first visited Cambodia. He was a project worker in a village called Trapaeng Keh, 2 hours drive from Phnom Penh, working with a Christian group called Faith. He visited this village and a number of other villages on his motorbike to help people overcome their poverty. There were practical projects in which he was involved: water supply, a grain store etc, projects that were all designed to help improve the quality of life for the people of this village. But he was also there to “help people think better”. That was his way of describing what he did when he told people about Jesus and the gospel. He saw that people had a particular way of thinking that needed changing and that Jesus’ way was better. Their old way of thinking was controlled by their Buddhism that said “what goes around comes around” – you are trapped in a cycle of poverty, and failure and there is no way to break out; what you are in the next cycle of life is conditioned by what you are in this; there is no way of breaking it, no sense of hope, only despair. “Help people think better” says that there is hope and grace and love and these come from Jesus.

“A new way of thinking” – that’s hard to do. All of us grow up being told that certain things are true: 13 is an unlucky number; bad luck will follow you if you walk under a ladder; I grew up being told that church is a place where women wear a hat; some people grow up thinking that “church is a place where only certain people go, and it is not for us and the likes of us”. I well remember consternation in Church when a woman (it happened to be the minister’s wife) came to Church regularly without a hat and wearing make-up; you would have thought that the roof had fallen in as far as some people were concerned. Today, these are just not issues, but for some people their very way of thinking about Church had been challenged and questioned. Have you heard about turning an oil tanker around? The answer that I found suggests that, depending on its speed, it might take 5-8 miles to stop and has a turning circle of 2 miles, taking 15 minutes to go through 180 degrees. But that is chicken feed compared to the time it takes to change the way in which people think and the attitudes with which we have grown up!

Jesus came challenging people to a new way of thinking. For some, it was a breath of fresh air, the old ways had been stifling and crushing and His new way of thinking set them free from the shackles of the old ways. For others, this new way of thinking was too much; they didn’t like it because they thought that there was nothing wrong with the old way and so they complained about His new ways. The background against which Jesus needs to be seen is Jewish; He inherited a Jewish way of thinking that was partly based on the Old Testament, but also partly based on the traditions and rules that had built up around, and in addition to, the Old Testament. He inherited that and in some ways fulfilled it, but He didn’t come to patch it up; He came to change it radically and to help and challenge people to think in a new way. There are at least four examples of that in and around today’s reading in Mark 2:18-28.

It came to light one day over the question of fasting. Fasting was and is a religious practice that people use from time to time to help them deal with certain difficult situations. It means going without food for a period of time in order to focus one’s mind on spiritual issues; some Church leaders have suggested a day of prayer and fasting next month for the Church in Scotland because of our present situation, a time for concentrated prayer. “*Now John’s...*” (v.18) But fasting tends to give expression to grief and repentance, as people humble themselves before God, so Jesus said: “*How can...*” (v.19f) John the Baptist was perhaps in prison by this time,

and his followers might have been grieving over his treatment and praying for him; by contrast Jesus is the bridegroom at the wedding and so His followers are to rejoice in His presence. There will be a time when it becomes appropriate for His followers to fast and grieve and be humble, but now is the time to rejoice and be glad because Jesus is here with His friends.

“No-one sews...” (v21f) Jesus used two everyday pictures to show that Jesus came to bring something completely new. First of all, imagine that you have an old pair of trousers, well-worn and well-washed, that fit your shape comfortably and there is a hole and you find a patch of completely new material and sew that onto your trousers. What will happen when you wash them? The new piece will shrink and will make an even bigger mess than had before. The patching doesn't work. Secondly, goat skins were used to store wine and new skins were used and when the wine was poured into the skins, it began to ferment inside the skins and so they would expand to hold the wine. If you were to try to use old skins for the second time, reusing and recycling, and poured in the wine and it began to expand, the old skins that were dry and hard, just cracked and burst and the wine would be lost. *“No, he...” (v22)* Jesus is not there to patch up the old Jewish ways; He has come to bring something quite new; Christianity began life being seen as a reforming sect within Judaism, but it quickly became clear that such was impossible. It was totally new and different, a new way of thinking.

There are three other examples here:

- Jesus calls Levi to be a disciple in the piece just before today's reading; we might look at this in more detail next week. Levi was a tax collector as were his friends and Jesus called Levi *“follow me”* and then worse He went to have dinner with Levi and his friends. Under the old way of thinking, these people are sinners to be kept out of God's kingdom, it is not for them, they'll contaminate it; Jesus' new way says that the kingdom is for everyone who believes, no matter who they are!
- The disciples were picking corn because they were hungry; *“Look why...” (v24)* They had 39 definitions of work and none was allowed on the Sabbath, it was against the Law; that was the way the Pharisees thought. Jesus showed them that even the great king David had broken the Law because he and his companions were hungry; they had eaten bread they shouldn't have eaten; Jesus says that there are more important needs than keeping every jot of the religious rules and regulations.
- Healing on the Sabbath: again they shouldn't heal on the Sabbath, it's work! So Jesus asks a question: *“Which is...” (3:4)* Under the new way of thinking, doing good, helping, healing become more important than every comma of the written code.

The old way of thinking was 'Keep the law, keep the law, keep the law'. By the law I mean the religious codes and regulations that told you what you could and could not eat; what you had to wear; when you had to do religious things; what offerings you had to make and when. 'Keep the law, keep the law, keep the law' had the effect of simply to making you aware of how often you break it. There were so many rules and regulations that they became a set of chains around people, a burden to carry, a weight on people's shoulders: "I have to do this and that and the next thing and oops, I forgot something else!" They had turned their relationship with God into a checklist of things to do, of rules to keep.

Jesus came and said that only two things are important: *“Love God; love your neighbour”* This is a totally new way of thinking and it's really very simple! The whole concept of love is about relationships: to love God is to respond to His love for us and to see how good and gracious God is and then express that love in worship and devotion; that's what really matters and not whether you're wearing a hat to do it! To

love one another is to be concerned for the needs and well-being of other people and to love others in the way Jesus wants is to be concerned for people in need, no matter who they are, no matter their postcode, no matter their background. The question we ask is 'how can I love God? How can I love other people?'

This year we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the Reformation in Scotland, John Knox and all that in 1560. Whatever else you think about the Reformation, it was about a new way of thinking, to rediscover the grace of God and His unconditional love and then respond that that in faith, as we are free to follow Jesus. But churches are very good at slipping back into the old ways of thinking. Take, for example, the hymns and songs that churches sing. I heard of one church recently that will only sing songs written within the last 3 years and we all know of Churches where they will only sing hymns that are at least 100 years old. Why is that old way of thinking? Because the date at the bottom of the hymn has become the most important thing, more important than using the words to express our love and devotion to God. Any hymn or song we sing, whether it is 200/300 years old or 6 months old, the only question we should ask of it is this: "how can this hymn/song help me express my love for God?" That's new way of thinking; that's Jesus new way of thinking.

Over the last 15 years much has been talked about the Church and the way that Church has been in past and is now and will be in the future. The key to these changes and a strong future Church is not tinkering with trivial things that could be superficial; the key to change and the future health and well-being of the Church is that we think properly. Here are two lists, ways in which people think about Church. There is a way of thinking says that Church is only for those **inside**, it is **Minister**-led and dominated; that we are a people who have **arrived** because we have joined the organisation as members and have nothing more left to do; the Church is an **end in itself**, that exists for its own sake and survival is the key to its future. The new way of thinking is quite different: there is a concern for the **outsider** and mission and how the Church can be open to anyone and the gospel heard by everyone; that Church is the whole **people** of God living, working and serving together; that we are a people on a **journey**, following Jesus, learning new things; and that the Church is the **instrument of God** in the world, affecting change in the world as we go. It is so easy for Churches to slip back into the old ways, to be solely concerned for ourselves and our survival; it is much better to be church that looks outward and is concerned to be God's co-workers in world.

The gospel is not a message of 'pull-up-your-socks' and be a slightly better person than the people around about you or than you were yesterday; the gospel is about making us new people. Christianity was not a slightly improved version of the old ways; Christianity was radically different from the old ways and plenty of people saw that at the time and opposed the Church. Jesus brought with Him a new way of thinking: *Love God, love your neighbour*. It's liberating! The only question I need to ask is how? How do I express my love for God? How do I express my love for my neighbour? What old ways of thinking do you still have? I can't sing these hymns? I can't use that number? I can't take that responsibility on in case I fail? The church can't allow 'these people' through our doors? What happens if our Church doesn't survive as it in now? All of these are old ways of thinking! Is it easy to change? No! Remember the oil tanker. But change we must – we need to think in a new way, in Jesus' way!