

MATTHEW 9:14-26
NEW WINE, NEW WINESKINS

What has changed in my lifetime? This is a really intriguing question. It's not just an old person's question, either. Television has gone from 3 channels in black and white, ending at 10.30pm with the little white dot, to round clock HD colour with hundreds of channels to choose from. News was something we got in the morning in the papers or occasionally on radio and television, hours after it had happened; now news is breaking on our television or computer or phone screens almost before it has finished happening. Phones went round and round when you 'dialled' a number and were very firmly attached to the wall; now phones are computers, cameras and other things as well as phones. I kept in touch with my friends by talking to them at school or by knocking on their door or occasionally by a phone call; facebook, twitter, skype, e-mail, blogs now allow people to keep in touch instantly across the world. Space had only just been visited; I was born the day after Sputnik 1 flew round the earth; we have walked on the moon and have discovered things about the universe that are astonishing. The pace of change is quicker and quicker, some find it alarming in the same way as people found the invention of electricity alarming, or voiced real concerns for the future of humanity when the first book was published from the first printing press.

Christians have two views of the world when we look at it like that. First, we want to keep some things as they are; we want some things in life to remain unchanging and rock solid because all of these changes leave us anxious and afraid. Our one great desire is that Church doesn't succumb to this mood for change and stays exactly way it is. Secondly, Church should change with the times and needs to change to use these new technologies to make the gospel heard in the world. There is a story of a television company visiting a village in rural England to film some Edwardian drama and they had to remove all kinds of new things from the village, but when they went to visit the village church, they didn't have to change a thing. Some will smile and say 'good'; others will shake their heads and moan about people stuck in the past! My attitude: it depends what you are changing! I'll leave that hanging....

Jesus was challenged by a group of people who were disciples of John the Baptist. They came with a question, all to do with what He did and didn't do. It was a question about fasting! Fasting was all part of the Jewish religious practice; there was an annual fast, when people went without food on the Day of Atonement and some Pharisees fasted twice a week. *"How is ..."* (9:14) It would seem that Jesus didn't fast, or at least not as rigorously as these others. Why not? *"How can..."* (9:15) Fasting is associated with a spirit of repentance, an expression of sorrow for sin and awareness of faults, failings and mistakes, seeking forgiveness from God; a sort of sackcloth and ashes spirit went along with fasting, a sad spirit.

Weddings are happy affairs! They are celebrations of love and the coming together of two people as husband and wife. In Jesus' time, the bride and her friends waited for the bridegroom to appear and then they all went in a great procession to his house for a party! The arrival of the bridegroom was a cause for celebration then as a wedding is still today. You want to know about planning weddings... Jesus likens His presence with the disciples and in the world as the presence of the bridegroom at the wedding; it is a cause for joy and celebration and not for sadness and sorrow! Having Jesus, is the cause of great joy for His friends; "Gloom-encompassed Christianity is an impossibility." (Barclay) There is a completely different spirit about Jesus; He brings grace to the world;

people rejoice to see Him. The story of Jairus' daughter is a happy story because Jesus brings grace and healing to this family.

"No-one sews..." (9:16f) Jesus gives two pictures about patching things up and it doesn't work. The first is about patching your old coat. You know the kind of thing: it is a coat you love, you've worn it for years and it is comfortable; it fits you well and you just feel cosy wearing it; but it has a hole developing in it, perhaps because it is so well-worn. What do you do? Well, you try to patch it! But Jesus says if you try to use a piece of new cloth to patch your old coat, the new patch will shrink and tear the old coat and make the hole even worse. There are times when patching up the old doesn't work. For the second, I'm not sure what the 21st century equivalent would be. Wine was stored in skins. When the new wine was poured into a skin it was still giving off gases and the new skin would stretch to accommodate these gases and the wine would be kept; if you tried to put new wine into a skin that had been used before and was old, it had lost its ability to stretch and so the new wine would simply burst the skin. New wine needs new wineskins.

Jesus did not come to patch up the old way of religion, but to bring something new to people's hearts. The old ways were all about rules, legalism we'd call it; "keep the rules and we'll be OK: God will be happy with us and we'll have achieved our salvation." Jesus did not come to add new rules or even take away the rules He didn't like; He simply brought a new kind of book altogether. He came with grace in His heart, ready to meet people in need and ready to bring the love of God to bear on people's lives. He came to bring the new wine of grace, love, forgiveness, peace, hope, acceptance, compassion. The Gospel is the fulfilment of the old, but at the same time is a new departure: *"Did you..." (Gal 3:2)* For Jesus, the answer is by believing what you heard!

I remember the first time I read *Treasure Island*. I couldn't put it down; I read it in a couple of days; it's a great adventure. Following Jesus is the greatest adventure of a lifetime, yet we run the risk of turning the Christian faith into something gloomy! It challenges about the kind of people we will be; there are times when we see God at work in us and through us; it challenges us about the kind of Church we will be as we adventure together; and there are times when we see God at work in Church life, working through events that we organise and we're delighted to see God at work and sense His presence. It is risky at times, exciting, daring, challenging, thrilling, fulfilling, hard work, but it is the adventure of a lifetime! Have you ever heard Christian faith described by these words? It is all of this and all because we believe in Jesus; all because the Spirit is at work in us and we are the people of God.

Jesus has not changed. The gospel has not changed. Who would want to change the gospel? It brings life to dead hearts, it brings light to our minds, it brings forgiveness to our guilt, it brings hope and courage for our fears, peace for our anxieties, reconciliation when we're lost and far from God. None of that has changed. Jesus is still the rock of our salvation, an unchanging Saviour in an ever-changing world and for our ever-changing lives. The new wine of the gospel is still new wine, life-changing, life-affirming grace.

There has been a huge culture change in Scotland in my lifetime: when I was growing up not many people worked on Sunday, the shops were shut; the church was the centre of a community's social life as well as religious life; people got their information from books, newspapers, and talking heads on the radio; music was on an LP that you could scratch

27th May 2012

and break. How do we do Church for people who work every Sunday? For families in which two parents are working and Sunday is a shopping day? Or for families where children spend alternate weekends with separated parents? How do we present the gospel to people who don't read books any more or who are not used to sitting listening to someone speak uninterrupted for 20 minutes? What kind of music do we use? I don't know the answers to some of these questions, but I do know that we need to be asking these questions now!

The Bridegroom is here; this is a day of joy and celebration; we delight in His love and grace, and rejoice in His presence and peace. Is "Gloom-encompassed Christianity an impossibility"? Let's reflect something of the joy of the Lord; the bridegroom is here. Love Him, believe Him, trust Him, serve Him.