

Rev Tim Perkins
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“And the One sitting on the throne said, ‘Behold, I make all things new.’” Rev. 21: 5

Dear Friends,

The Methodist Conference is meeting this week via Zoom. I am not a conference representative, but I have had the opportunity to take part in one of the fringe events. It was a webinar titled, “Everyone an evangelist,” led by our Evangelism & Growth Team. One of the panel of speakers was Elaine Heath. She led a retreat I went on a couple of years ago, so it was good to engage with her again. One of the statements she made that I jotted down was this: “People and places never change except from a place of pain and discomfort.” I guess it is obvious really. If we are content, if everything is going along nicely, why would we want to change? Where would the motivation to change come from.

All the major movements for societal change and regeneration that I can think of have had their roots in a place of pain and discomfort. We see it at large in the world in our time through the continuing cry for justice on behalf of the oppressed and the forgotten ones of this world. We see it in the cry of the earth itself which has been blighted and polluted by our consumer-oriented society to the point that we are poisoning both the earth and the skies. And we see it in the pages of Scripture, from the pain of slavery in Egypt and exile in Babylon, to the events of Holy week.

I believe we are also seeing it in the Methodist Church in this country. Many within our church our crying out in pain for: the society in which we live; those who are marginalised both outside and inside the church; the loss of members and the loss of influence; the perceived restrictions that many feel from our systems and structures; our failure to engage with our changing world.

Perhaps, as a church, we have become comfortable and complacent and have therefore seen no need to change. The Church has served us well and that is all that matters! But is it, really? I believe there are many in our churches who are crying out in pain and those cries are being heard – heard by God.

I have been reading chapters from the Book of Isaiah over the last week. I am always struck by the change in tone that is introduced in Chapter 40. The book moves from prophecies of judgement on apathy and oppression to ones of hope and liberation for those in pain. And this change in tone is expressed in these words: “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed...A voice of one calling: ‘In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain. And the glory of the Lord will be revealed.’”

A few chapters later, God speaks through Isaiah again saying, “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

God always hears the cries of God's people and always responds to them in the way that God alone knows best. Sometimes, that comes through stripping away from us the things we have put our trust in that are not God.

I believe God is using this time to reshape the church. God is wanting to do something new amongst us. God is always wanting to do something new. That is God's mission statement, as recorded in the quotation above from the Book of Revelation. The question is "do we perceive it?" It is a question much repeated in the first three chapters of Revelation when John writes to the Churches of Asia and in each case finishes God's message to them with the words: "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches?"

What is the Spirit saying to the Church today? What might the Spirit be saying to your church? As we begin to emerge from our lockdown and seek to participate in the rebuilding of our community and society, what can the Church offer that will make a positive difference and bring about transformation?

Last week I took part in a District Superintendents Retreat via Zoom. Some of the questions we reflected on together were these:

- What am I enjoying about lockdown?
- What am I not enjoying about lockdown?
- What is now being done in and through our congregations that was unthinkable just three months ago?
- Having not used them for three months, what are our buildings for? How might we use them differently? Do we still need them?
- What have you learned during lockdown as a church that excites you about worship?
- What have you learned about evangelism and building relationships with new people?
- What have you not grieved for or missed as a church during lockdown?
- What might you decide not to pick up again?
- How have you perceived God's presence and hiddenness?
- What has lockdown taught you about the foundations of your mission as a local church?

I suggest that these are all questions that as individuals, and as churches, it would be good for us to reflect on before rushing back to our buildings to do the things we have always done in the ways we have always done them so that we don't have to change anything.

As you reflect upon these questions you might like to keep in mind these words of Jesus: "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. 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." (Matthew 9: 16 – 17.)

Every Blessing

Rev Tim Perkins