

Views from the Pews - Church and Change

Here's a paradox for you. We proclaim that the world was turned upside down between Friday night and Sunday morning, yet the arrival of a new Incumbent is always a time of uncertainty for any Parish – will he/can she initiate changes that we don't feel comfortable with?

Jesus' earthly life was full of change and instability, yet most of our parishioners are attracted by our deep liturgical roots, and by the seeming solidity of the church building. Church architecture is usually a metaphor for God's unchanging love.

Resurrection, Ascension, and Jesus' promise to come again when we least expect it are all markers of permanent change, yet one of our favourite images of the Christian life is the monastic one, with its unchanging rhythms of worship, work and communal eating.

The Apostles were great agents for change, setting the Mediterranean world alight with the Word of God, yet we remain very cautious about change, feeling disloyal to past generations of churchgoers if things move too fast. Also, modern psychology and psychiatry warn that speedy and uncontrolled change may be predictive and even causative of mental distress. Conditions on the Autism Spectrum make people vulnerable to random and unexpected change.

Change can however be managed in a Christian fashion. Think how far we have come in the median lifetime of our parishioners. Women are ordained. Te Reo Māori is spoken alongside Latin. Our congregation is ethnically diverse to a degree our grandparents would never have contemplated. These changes are not accidental – they are led. It is time to honour those change-leaders that showed courage but also humility. It is time to think about how change is best effected. What was done well? What mistakes were made? Are our leadership structures inclusive? How do we manage doubt and dissent? How do we avoid making people feel disempowered?

And, outside the Church, how do we as Christians help with constructive change-management? What is there in the Gospels about change? There are plenty of examples of healthy change-management in the secular world and a challenge for the week ahead might be to examine the life of William Wilberforce, one of the most disruptive people who spring to mind. He challenged a political and economic establishment in the name of racial equality. What gifts did he bring to the task of dismantling trans-Atlantic slavery? What can we learn from his experience?

Richard Swarbrick