

Changing Times

1964 was the year that Bob Dylan released the album *Times Are A-Changing* as he heralded in the swinging Beatlemania 60's. Many of you were at your prime then. Dylan was a music prophet of his time, his generation, your generation, would indeed be a catalyst of change; On Wednesday morning, a couple returned to this church to revisit the place, where they said *I do*, with their two grown daughters - memories and emotions came flooding back for them.

*Come gather 'round people wherever you roam
And admit that the waters around you have grown
And accept it that soon you'll be drenched to the bone
If your time to you is worth savin'
Then you better start swimmin' or you'll sink like a stone
For the times, they are a-changin' – Bob Dylan.*

No-one can hold back the advancing years.

A Church of Scotland minister published an article this week, to encourage fellow female ministers going through the change of life, the menopause. She called it “How I'm changing”.

She wrote, “I know not to covet my neighbour's donkey! Though working in my new role with our probationer ministers, I have to confess that I do covet their energy and oomph. I still love ministry, and when I see our new ministers start out I would love to be in their shoes, setting forth with their passion for the Gospel and a commitment to the Church....

Old age, they say, never comes by itself. There are of course signs. Hair colour lightens and the eyes weaken. I may be a bus-pass-loving sexagenarian, but refuse to be labelled as 'old'. Though I have to confess that this menopausal season has not been without its challenges.”

I can't empathise with what she feels in her present changes in her life, but I can certainly relate to her, in the sense of our times are a-changing, as my unexpected visit to the hospital at Christmas, has certainly began a change process within me.

Life comes along doesn't it, and changes us, and if I'm honest, I hope and pray that I'm not turning into a grumpy old man! But if I am, I apologise in advance, and I'm already praying for much grace and forgiveness.

But I hope the changes within me will also be positive and direct me to what's important in life and where we can find strength to cope with those changes, and it's this that I want us to consider this morning.

This is the first Sunday after Easter, when we meet with disciples who were facing changing times and had big questions to face about God and Easter. Jesus had been crucified, their world would never be the same. But somethings began to happen, just like signs of spring, buds began to appear...could the impossible be possible!

That's what the gospel writer John wants to help us believe.

For the resurrection was what enabled them to deal with the changing times.

Four keys things happen in John 20.

1. Peter and John race to the tomb. Although the risen Jesus is not seen, they see the evidence inside the tomb and we're told that John sees and believes. First bud of spring, first sighting of a swallow but one swallow doesn't make a summer.
2. Mary Magdalene meets with Jesus at the tomb and sees a person and she thinks it's the gardener, until he speaks her name "Mary". She believes. A woman, the first person to meet the resurrected Jesus. Could it be possible.
3. The disciples huddled in a small room. Suddenly Jesus appears and shows them his wounds of love, and they hear him speak, and receive the Holy Spirit breathed upon them. Yes, something is happening, new life has come.
4. Thomas, who was absent the week before Jesus visits the upper room, is there a week later, when Jesus appears again, and this doubting disciple gives the most confident utterance of faith, as he falls before Jesus and says "My Lord and My God". Yes, Yes, Yes. Christ is risen!

The disciple John, who saw and believed, would go on to write his blessed gospel, as he wants everyone to see and believe what these first disciples encountered; he's an evangelist, and his gospel is full of signposts, to who Jesus was and is.

The fourth gospel has these wonderful seven "I Am" statements and they come to life with the resurrection.

*I am the bread of life (John 6:35),
I am the light of the world (8:12),
I am the gate (10:7),
I am the good shepherd (10:11, 14),
I am the resurrection and the life (11:25),
I am the way and the truth and the life (14:6),
And I am the true vine (15:1).*

But John also had time for those who struggle with their faith, and thankfully he added the story of Thomas into his blessed gospel.

And our reading today particularly focuses on Thomas.

What was it like for Thomas, after he was absent from Jesus's appearance to the disciples?

Where was he?

Was Thomas a loner?

Did he enjoy his own company?

Did he need time to think, to grieve, to find space, to clear his head of the drama of Good Friday?

Perhaps today we can empathise with Thomas.

Whatever was happening, times were a-changing for Thomas.

It won't be too long until we begin to see the butterflies, those beautiful insects with wings. Aren't they incredible little creatures. I just love seeing them, as they flutter by.

Their story is quite amazing. It's worth pausing for a moment, as we enter the season of spring to give thanks for the butterfly which points us to something greater.

Once upon a time, it was a caterpillar, crawling upon the face of the earth, many feet, all going in the same direction; an easy prey to all the birds, an easy catch, as it moves along the surface of the earth.

And then one day, it somehow finds his way into a dark place, to hang upside down, then something new slowly appears; from their patient waiting, and their dark days, into the light comes the most beautiful butterfly...times are a-changing for it...sink or swim...die or fly....

With colourful wings and its ability to fly, this little caterpillar has been transformed into something of beauty and majesty. His time was a-changing.

There is a verse in the Bible that says

“What no eye has seen,

what no ear has heard,

and what no human mind has conceived

the things God has prepared for those who love Him”

Times are a changing and we are a changing people, we are a-changing into being like Jesus.

Thomas was at the stage of the caterpillar; he was running as fast as his little legs could take him to get away from the heat of his predators – the Jewish authorities and the Romans. He was running from his conscience; He was running from guilt; He was running from heartbreak.

But at some point, that week, he stopped running, and he found his way back to the disciples – gathered together in an upper room.

But he is now hanging out with them to dry – listening to their resurrection stories – listening to their new found enthusiasm – listening to their hope in the risen Jesus.

But the more they would say Jesus is risen, I would guess, that the more Thomas would have gone back into his shell and said, *unless I see for myself*.... Like the caterpillar hanging upside down waiting and perhaps hoping for something to happen.

He missed the boat, he missed the glory of Jesus appearing, and breathing upon the disciples and showing them his wounds, and gifting them the Holy Spirit, and he knew it deep down!

He could see that his fellow disciples were now flying, they were like butterflies, they had been given their wings, and they were encouraging each other.

But Thomas was in his dark place, alone, hiding, in grief and in pain.

He kept saying, "I will not believe, unless I touch the scars and the wounds, I won't believe."

Then suddenly, unannounced, Jesus appears and Thomas knew his times were a-changing.

This is the wonder of this story. Jesus did not give up on Thomas.

Jesus is gracious; Thomas meets with Jesus, and obtains the proof that he needs. Yes, he missed the original blessing, but he now sees for himself the marks. Like us, in our modern world, we were not there, but yet there is ample proof for us also to believe.

What strikes me most about Thomas's story is not that he doubted, but that he did so publicly, without shame or guilt, and that his faith community allowed him to do so. And what I love about Jesus's response is that he met Thomas right where he was, freely offering this disciple the testimony of his own scars, his own pain.

He allowed Thomas to change.

What about us, friends, are we a-changing? Is God working in our lives, demonstrating his love and grace, are we responding to it? Whether we are 5 or 85 God is still at work in our lives.

My 5-year-old grandson Jack, said to his gran on Friday, out of the blue, "Gran, why did God make us? Was it because he was lonely, and he needed friends", and gran smiled and wisely said, "That's right Jack, he wants us to be his friends" and with that Jack said, "I want to be his friend and so let's go outside and see if we can see God in the clouds".

Yes, questions about God begin as early as 5 and I hope and pray that we still have them when we are 85.

What was it that made the change in Thomas' life? It was meeting with Jesus, at that point his life was turned upside down, and he could say, "My Lord and My God".

That's how we deal with the changing times in our lives. Whether we are at the change of life like my ministerial friend, who spoke of the woman in the Bible that Jesus encountered with the menopausal issue, and who was seen by everyone as an outcast, she writes, "For our haemorrhaging woman, despite the drain on her finances and wellbeing, it was her faith that kept her whole, complete. The menopause does not diminish us in God's eyes. We are made in His image. Ever loved. Treasured. Precious. Valued. In all seasons of life."

Whatever or however life changes us, remember Thomas, and remember that he found a new way to deal with his life changing situation. In the midst of his darkness, he discovered Jesus to be "His Lord and God".

This we know, because Thomas was a changed man after this encounter, no longer in the shadows, but he is now present with the disciples, as he goes out fishing with them, and again meets with Jesus. Tradition tells us that he ended up taking the gospel to India, and there he was martyred, as he laid the foundation for a Christian church in this nation, and he became their patron saint. He was willing to bear the scars of love for his Lord and God.

I started with the lyrics from Bob Dylan, let me finish with another verse, from the same song,

*The line it is drawn, the curse it is cast
The slowest now will later be fast
As the present now will later be past
The order is rapidly fadin'
And the first one now will later be last
'Cause the times, they are a-changin'*

Times are a-changing, they are for each one of us, as the grains of sand disappear all too quickly, I pray that we may all continue to change and to change into the likeness of Jesus. It begins with these four words, "My Lord and My God!"

Amen.