

Past Sins and Future Gifts (and vice versa)

A sermon on Matthew 9:1-17; Isaiah 29:13-24 & 1 Corinthians 9:1-16 by Nathan Nettleton, 26 January 2020

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Message

Jesus calls us to neither conservatism nor iconoclasm, but to a faithful reckoning with the gifts and the sins of the past as we welcome and adapt to the new.

Sermon

Throughout the history of the Church, there has been a constant struggle between the conservatives and the progressives. The struggle goes back to the time of Jesus and beyond, and of course, both sides want to claim him as one of their own.

The conservatives can be characterised as those who believe that there was a time in the past when everything was better; in fact when everything was more or less as it should be. And so for them, the goal of faithfulness is to steadfastly protect the legacy of that golden age where it still exists, and to turn back the clock and recover that legacy where it has been lost.

The progressives believe that we are evolving towards a better future. They say that God is always doing new things and calling us to new things, and so old traditions and practices that keep us tied to the past are to be rejected. Only that which is new and fresh contains life and hope for the future.

This long time struggle in the church is, of course, mirrored outside the church. Substitute the word “moderates” for “progressives”, and you might immediately see how this debate has torn apart the Australian Liberal Party in the past decade. And stand around any Australia Day barbecue this weekend and talk about the emerging changes in Australian society and you’ll quickly see people polarise around one or the other of these instinctive positions. Is the golden age behind us and needing to be recovered and preserved, or is it before us, ready to emerge in all its glory if we will just clear away the rubble of outdated attitudes and practices?

In tonight’s reading from the prophet Isaiah, we heard God speak of people whose religion is nothing but memorised rules and traditions; people whose worship of God is just meaningless words and whose hearts are somewhere else. That sounds like a condemnation of the conservatives – one up for the progressives? – but is it necessarily?

If your religion is *nothing but* memorised rules and traditions, that’s not good, but what if your religion is memorised rules and traditions, *and* sincere affection, personal holiness, and energetic action for justice and peace and freedom? What if the words *are* truly meaningful and your heart really *is* in it? The prophet doesn’t say you can’t have both.

(The following section was omitted from the preached version of this sermon)

In our reading from first Corinthians, we heard the Apostle Paul talking about claiming and defending our rights, and this often comes up in the same debate. Think about the debates that surround the controversy over whether to call today Australia Day or Invasion Day. One side is saying “we have a *right* to have continuing control over our traditional lands”, and the other is saying “that’s all in the past and you just have to accept that we now have the *right* to live on and control the land our ancestors took possession of.”

But what the Apostle Paul is reminding us is that even if you believe that you have certain rights, that doesn't mean that you have to claim them. You might conclude that voluntarily laying aside some of your "rights" would be a contribution to making the world a better place. Freedom is not just about having rights, but about being free to choose if, when and how to exercise them. Imagine if all those fierce defenders of the right to carry guns were to say "we still believe in the principle of the right to carry guns, but we have decided to lay aside our rights and give up our guns for the sake of the common good." One can dream!

Jesus addresses the question directly in the latter part of our gospel reading. Some disciples of John the Baptist come to him and ask why his disciples don't observe the traditional patterns of fasting. Why don't your people follow the same traditions as us? And Jesus's answer, wrapped in a metaphor about weddings and bridegrooms, is essentially "Because everything has changed. The old ways don't suit the new reality."

And then he goes on with two of his more memorable illustrations. You can't patch an old coat with a piece of new unshrunk cloth. If you do, the patch will shrink later and tear and even bigger hole than before. The inappropriate patch will actually make things worse. If you want another illustration of this, go up to Ian's factory some time, and get him to explain to you the difficulties they often have making allowance for different rates of shrinkage in the wood when they are manufacturing or repairing wooden furniture.

Jesus's second illustration is well known, but not quite as well understood in today's world. "You can't put new wine in old wineskins," he says, "or the skins will burst and the wine will be lost." Nowadays wine is packaged in glass bottles, but in the good old days, wine was packaged in not-very-vegan-friendly leather wine-skins. As the wine fermented and the gases expanded, the skin would stretch to its limits and eventually dry and harden. A skin could only do that once. Put new wine in an old dried skin, and there was no stretch left. It just burst.

So is Jesus then taking sides with the progressives and dismissing the conservatives? At first glance, it sounds like it. Everything has changed. The old ways don't suit the new reality. You have to find new containers for the heady new brew. He's certainly not against the progressives here. But maybe it's not that simple.

You see, the illustrations that Jesus uses are not condemning either the old or the new. He is not rubbishing well-aged wine in aged wineskins, or the mending of old coats. If anything, he is affirming the goodness of both, but warning us of the risks of attempting to mix the two in thoughtless and careless ways. Both the old and the new are worthy of respect, but you can't just keep layering them on top of each other. When new things emerge, and are worthy of welcome, the old ways will need to be carefully and creatively adapted, but that's not the same thing as saying they need to be immediately thrown out. The old and the new can coexist, but not without care, respect and compromise on both sides.

One of the things that is necessary if we are to learn to compromise faithfully like that is the humility to recognise and admit to our failings. The natural conservatives among us are too often unwilling to admit to the sins of the past. We want to hold onto an over simplified rosy reading of our history. And the natural progressives among us are too often unwilling to admit that we can't foresee all the consequences of our exciting new directions, some of

which will probably prove disastrous. We want to believe that the future we are building is a glorious triumph of human hope, blessed by God with wonderful outcomes.

In the earlier part of our gospel reading, we heard the story of Jesus's encounter with a paralysed man. It seems that Jesus took one look at the man and knew that this man was paralysed by his own guilt over things he had done in the past. You know how that can happen. Serious guilt can increasingly cripple us, and in some cases can make us increasingly unwilling and unable to get up and do anything about anything. Left ignored and festering for long enough, it can literally immobilise us.

Recognising this man as such a case, Jesus responds by addressing the cause rather than the symptoms. "Take heart, mate; your sins are forgiven." Jesus knows that when that sinks in, it will be enough to get the bloke back on his feet. But when a group of angry religious conservatives object to him presuming to have the authority to forgive sins, he decides to prove the point by speeding up the process and telling the man to get up on his feet right away. Sure enough, the man gets up and walks. With the sins of his past dealt with, he is free to embrace a new previously unimagined future.

Let's think about what these things might mean in the context of today's Australia Day/ Invasion Day considerations of modern Australia's relationship with its first nations' peoples.

Not so long ago, one of Australia's more famous conservative prime ministers steadfastly resisted the calls to say "sorry" to Aboriginal people for their past treatment, and he condemned those who expressed a "black armband" view of Australian history. We elected a more progressive prime minister who led the parliament in making a hugely important national apology to the stolen generation, the first nations people who had been forcibly removed from their families as children.

There are not many now who would deny that that apology was a good thing, but many of us want to hastily move on as though that is all behind us now. We desperately want our new patch on the old coat to hold without us having to examine the coat to see how extensively torn it actually was, and we resent calls for further reckoning with the sins of the past. But apologising to the stolen generations does not heal the wounds of the earlier dispossession or the hundreds of frontier massacres. Modern Australia was built on a legacy of violent dispossession and mass murder of first nations peoples. And the longer we allow our guilt to fester, the more it paralyses us. This is not just some theoretical justice question. It is about bringing desperately needed healing to our whole nation, black and white together.

Jesus is offering to forgive our sins and lift us to our feet, but we can't accept forgiveness for things we are still in denial about, so we remain paralysed on the floor. And conservatives and progressives point the finger of blame at one another to explain our ongoing predicament.

If we can get beyond the finger pointing and face up realistically to the amount of blood that has been shed and the amount of cultural destruction that has been inflicted, we will probably find that we need the wisdom of both the instinctively conservative and the instinctively progressive among us to find our way forward as a reconciled nation.

If I may be so presumptuous as a white fella, let's look at some of this from the Aboriginal side. Many of our Aboriginal sisters and brothers sound innately conservative in the way they

talk about the old ways and the traditional practices. They value and long for the legacy of the thousands years of culture they enjoyed prior to the British occupation. But almost universally, they also know and accept that there is no going back. Even if every non-aboriginal person was evicted from the country, the experience and culture of first nations peoples has been irrevocably changed. The coat can't be untorn. It will have to be wisely and carefully mended, and that doesn't demand a false choice between the old and the new. It involves both, brought together with care, respect and creativity.

Have you noticed how the present climate and bushfire crises have got people talking again about traditional indigenous fire management practices? This is a great example of bridging the foolish conservative-progressive divide. It shows us how progressives seeking for a better future can recognise the need to creatively learn from the best of the ways of the past. In New South Wales they've set up some all-indigenous units in the Rural Fire Service, and those firefighters are drawing on the wisdom of the old ways, but they have no plans to do away with trucks with water tanks on the back. The new future utilises the best from two different pasts, and modern Aboriginal culture does that well.

But even when those of us who are instinctively progressive get over our total iconoclasm and recognise the need to learn from the past, we are always in danger of doing it hastily and stupidly and ending up with burst wineskins and torn coats. The way forward requires careful and respectful listening and learning and creative compromise and partnering. That's true in our nation, and it's true in our churches.

The wisdom of Jesus is not confined to one realm or the other. The wisdom of Jesus speaks truth into all our situations. It doesn't speak simple answers, but it speaks truth and invites us into the conversation and the journey of finding the path of faithful living into the future. Jesus calls us to neither conservatism nor progressive iconoclasm. There are times and situations that require more of one or more of the other, and Jesus helps us find the way. We have to faithfully reckon with the sins of the past, but we also have to faithfully receive the gifts of the past. We equally need to humbly acknowledge the inevitability of damaging sins in our brave new future, without being paralysed by that awareness, but, knowing that new times will need some new ways, we need to look to the unknown future with hope and courage.

Jesus has walked this way before us. As a nation, as a church, and as individuals, now is the time to follow him in faithfully reckoning with both the gifts and the sins of the past as we follow him in welcoming and adapting to the new future that he is beckoning us into.