

Sermon 1 – January 13, 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Over the summer, I've been lazing around, feet up on the sofa, with a magazine in one hand and a cup of tea or a glass of wine in the other. It feels like luxury!

I have been enjoying this slower pace and the mindless reading and distraction light reading provides. But I have discovered that magazines seem to have something in common: whether it is Woman's Weekly or Simply You, Urbis or House and Garden, they all think that we can improve on things. From reading these pages, with gorgeous homes and sylph like models most of us simply do not measure up.

Given that most of the models in fashion magazines are in their late teens or early twenties, it is little wonder that large parts of such magazines are given over to cosmetic products and ways to enhance your appearance. Suggesting that if only you bought some wonder cream or undertook some simple procedure or another, you too might recline elegantly and gracefully on the edge of a swimming pool in a bikini, skin taut & glistening in the sun.

House magazines are similar: showing homes with manicured lawns filled with the latest home décor. The ordinary home - well not those that I know - does not fit this image, so these magazines

kindly provide us with contact details of manufacturers and the names of architects and interior designers.

Apparently cosmetic surgery is on the rise, and home renovations are a never-ending source of business for builders and interior shops.

The reason for all this is that most things are designed to wear out. Planned obsolescence means that modern washing machines and fridges last little more than 5 years. Manufacturers build their businesses on the premise that a new model will be required every few years, with better features and a brighter exterior.

Similarly, fashion designers, whether of clothing, furniture or wallpaper, all make their money by fostering the latest trends and colour schemes and styles.

All very well when it comes to furniture and appliances, but not quite so convenient when it comes to people. No matter how much money we are prepared to invest in ourselves – in our physical bodies – gym memberships or costly creams - we are also designed to wear out and die. Fortunately, our shelf life is a little longer than 5 years.

Of course, many of us protest this like Dylan Thomas in his 'Do not go gentle into that good night: rail, rail against the dying of the light.'

And in the US there are apparently people who are so concerned about their terminal condition that they have opted to have their

bodies frozen, in some suspended state of animation, in the hope that in some distant future there will be people around to cure their diseases and to offer them eternal life.

Death is an unknown quantity and for many a scary prospect. But death is inevitable. From birth, we grow and mature and decline. Physically we are all a bit worse off than we were yesterday. Sad but true.

This is how the material world is for all living species: people, animals, plants, come into being, live for a time, and die. Protest as we might – fight against it – it makes no difference – we cannot change this physical law. Even the best designed furniture and clothing will one day wear out.

The same is not true of the spiritual world. Phyllis Tickle in a book called the Great Emergence, discusses the evolution of the Christian church. She says that massive transitions take place in the church every 500 years. In her book, she describes a series of Greats: the Great Transformation – when Christ lived among us; the time of Gregory the Great, the Great Schism and the Great Reformation. Now she says that the church is facing yet another massive transition.

We can see that in churches here with declining attendance and an ageing membership. Many denominations are considering how to best address this - and some of the tools they pick up are the ones that we would use in the physical world. Cosmetic surgery – re-configuring worship spaces; buying new technology and equipment – getting rid of the organ and bringing in guitars;

But spiritual development does not follow the same rules as physical change. There is no point applying the same renovation techniques to the church as to our homes or our bodies. The spiritual world is not subject to the same process of growth, death and decay. The spiritual world is one of ever-increasing forward momentum.

As we look at the world, we see that there is a continual development, a forward progression. There are always blips of course – the path forwards does not run smooth. But we live in a world that is increasingly humane to its people, treating them with greater equality and respect. Racism, sexism – the old prejudices are gradually dying. Attention is shifting – now it is turning towards care for other species and to concern for the planet.

There is a sense that the spiritual dimension continues to unfold and develop over time. We must trust that some things are out of our control – we need the grace to let go and allow the spirit to take charge.

John the Baptist knew that. In the gospel we hear him acknowledge that his role is at an end – that he is about to be superseded by one greater than him, by someone who will baptise in a different way – with water and with fire.

John knows how to read the signs and how to step gracefully out of the way of the new. He is not holding on for all he is worth to his position. We all know I am sure, of those who stay on in a role beyond their appointed time, and when that happens they become a stopper, a block to forward progress.

The world is filled with change – as the hymn writer put it – “change and decay in all around I see.” Our friends die, a family member falls ill, our health declines, a church closes.

We need hope and strength to cope with such change. We need an anchor in an ever-changing and challenging world. And we have other needs too: for friendship, for belonging and for meaning. We long for our world to be a better place.

This is where clever marketing seduces us. It tells us that we will be happier if we have a new car or buy that latest gadget or fashion item. We can be easily manipulated. But the promises of acquiring more stuff and looking better do not meet this need. The longing we have is in our hearts and our souls. It’s a spiritual hole, and will not be filled by something on the physical plane.

We are like those people in first century Palestine, people filled with expectation and hungry for a Messiah to save them from the situation they were in – politically & individually. They had found John – now they are presented with Jesus.

Jesus appeared among them, and was baptised with them – in solidarity with them. Jesus from this first appearance was about to reveal himself as the one who could show them a new spiritual way to satisfy the needs of their hearts.

Our longings too can be met in Jesus. We can have the encouragement of prayer and the comfort of scripture. Passages like this one from today’s Old Testament reading in Isaiah:

Fear not, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you;
When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned.
You are precious in my sight and I love you.

Through all the changing scenes of life, we have the constancy of God. And today this second Sunday of the Epiphany we experience the new revelation in Christ.

We sing: Change and decay in all around I see
 O thou who changest not abide with me.

Amen.