

Jesus Rejected by the Jews – Reflecting on Change – John 10:1-10

We are focusing on two Lectionary readings, one in the Gospel of John, which is titled ‘Jesus is rejected by the Jews’. In a nutshell, for me this story is about the inability of these kinsmen of Jesus to see what he was on about. They weren’t content with the profoundness and universal logic of what he was saying; they weren’t satisfied with all he had done. They wanted yet another unambiguous sign of some sort. For me, the truth of the matter is that they were not open to change. If I could use a contemporary equivalent; some folk, even now, are climate change deniers. They neither accept the wisdom of the expert scientists, nor the logic of the case. They want a sign. Yet, even when we see the world’s temperature climbing year upon year and more and more extreme weather events, they want a better sign. Like Jesus’ kinsman, what they really don’t want is change. So today I’m going to say something about change over our lifetime; how we’ve all coped with change, how we can cope with it in the future and where God is in all this.

Firstly, I want to set the scene. In the area of technology change can be amazingly rapid.

- An image of a New York Street in 1900 shows all horses and not one car. Yet 10 years later in the same city there is just one horse in sight!
- On an image of the London Tube in 2010, most folk are just chilling out. Contrast it with a train in 2019, all the commuters are now plugged in on-line – even a geriatric like me now listens to podcasts on the train.

It is only when we look back that can we really appreciate the profound changes, not only technologically, but in our attitudes and beliefs. My working life journey is a telling example of how blind I have been to the profound changes that I only understood as I looked back. I started my working life as a laboratory assistant at Newport Power Station. Both it and Richmond Power Station where I later went used a range of black and brown coal and furnace oil to produce electricity. Coal had been the fuel of choice worldwide since the start of the Industrial Revolution. In Glasgow in the 1890s black smoke was something to be prized, every chimney in sight gushing copious quantities. It was a sign of wealth and productivity. People put up with the grime and bronchitis.

All that began to change in 1952 when what became known as the Great London Smog hit London over a three day period. We’d all seen ‘pea souper’ fogs before. I recall a few each winter; car down to a crawl and black specks that stuck to you and itched unless you washed them off. We don’t see them nowadays. But the Great London Smog was something else. Public transport and picture theatres closed and life ground to a halt. The official death toll was 4000 people, but unofficially the toll may have been up to 12,000 due mainly to respiratory problems. The cause was a temperature inversion, which prevented unburnt air pollutants blowing away. Black smoke was suddenly seen as a problem and change was needed.

That was the world impacting on Newport Power Station when I started working there in 1959. The power station had to clean up its act. I vividly remember the day when TV screens were first placed in the furnace rooms at Newport to allow the firemen to see what was spewing out of the chimneys. Now they could immediately respond to adjust airflow to the furnaces and eliminate the unburnt ‘soot’. Given that TV had only come to Australia four years earlier, it was for me a momentous occasion and a significant change in how industry responded to a problem.

In John 10:1-10 we hear about how the folk in the Temple responded to Jesus’ call for change. The greatest of all Hebrew Scripture passages, the 23rd Psalm reminds us that, through all the changes in our

lives, God remains the one unchanging refuge – the God who restores our soul, who leads us in right paths and walks with us through the darkest valley.

From the early 1950s, in part because of the pollution problems with black smoke, oil played an increasingly important part in driving industry and heating our houses. Oil consumption grew five-fold in the 15 years after the Great London Smog. While previously we used wood, coke and briquettes at home, oil heaters became increasingly popular while fuel oil was used on ships and throughout industry. However, by the mid 1960's this change began to have enormous environmental impacts. Fish died in their millions in lakes throughout Germany and Scandinavia and forests died in industrial areas of Europe and America. The world suddenly knew about sulphur dioxide and acid rain.

In hindsight, like the problem of black smoke, we should have seen it coming. Furnace oils typically contained 3 or more percent sulphur, so every litre of oil burnt produced about 12 litres of sulphur dioxide. I should have seen it coming. We had oil-fuelled boilers at both Newport and Richmond power stations and I'd tested the oil we burnt for sulphur content. I was also aware of the impact of sulphur dioxide in the air, as by this time I had investigated a spate of acid rain corrosion problems, usually in air-conditioning systems.

The culprit was invariably the gases spewing from the chimney of an oil fired boiler nearby.

Fortunately for all of us, it was relatively easy to remove sulphur from oils, so from its peak in the late 1960s sulphur dioxide pollution has progressively decreased in the Developed World.

Whilst we usually think of the technological changes first, when we think of change, it seems to me that it is the human changes that have had the greatest impact on each of us. I think we need to admit, that we have all profoundly changed in many ways, particularly the longer you have lived. Let me give you some examples:

- While indigenous Australians still suffer severe disadvantage and our 'Closing the Gap' agenda has so much to achieve, our heart for their plight is at least now acknowledged. In my youth however, indigenous Australians could not vote, children were taken from their parents, there was not one aboriginal painting in the National Gallery of Victoria, Truganina's skeleton hung in our museum and returned aboriginal servicemen were often precluded from some RSL clubs. I should have been outraged by all this stuff. Yet as Christians we were declaring, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." How shamefully blind we were.
- Capital punishment still prevailed when I was young. To my shame, I remember vividly where I was when Ronald Ryan was hanged. I was in my car in Hoddle Street, going to work. I know where I should have been that day; with the very few protesters outside Pentridge where he was hung.
Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful." How blind we were.
- We men were, for the most part, pretty chauvinistic in decades past and most women tacitly accepted the status quo. We've still got huge problems, but more women in parliaments and on boards and the 'Me2' movement are making a difference.
Jesus said, "Blessed are they which are persecuted," How blind we were.
- I remember now with disgust the view I had of same sex relationships throughout most of my life. Indeed, it only really started to change in my fifties when a lesbian minister became a really wonderful mentor to me. How blind I had been and I suspect that also holds for many of you.
Jesus said, "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness." How blind we have been.
- Many of us lived through the era of the White Australia policy, an absolute anathema to what we believe today. I'm not sure that I was ever a racist, but I certainly didn't actively campaign against

it in the 50's; very few did. How blind we were. Yet racism still raises its ugly head and we must call it out every time, for **Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."** **How deaf we so often are to hear God's call.**

You will all have stories like these; the longer we live the more we remember and hopefully the more we discern the mistakes of our past. I ask myself now, how did I tolerate such injustices? Why didn't I not see the discrimination against indigenous peoples, the LGBT community and folk from other races? As a professing Christian, knowing the messages of Jesus, and his Sermon on the Mount in particular, and knowing his criticism of the Jews for their blindness, how did I not see how utterly blind I was?

And in my air pollution journey, I still had two more lessons to learn:

- Through the 1970s, the use of chlorinated fluorinated hydrocarbons (CFCs) skyrocketed as an aerosol, a fire suppressant and in refrigeration. In 1985 the world was shocked to learn that they were causing ozone depletion in the stratosphere where a hole was opening up to expose us to much higher UV radiation with all its health and biological implications. I couldn't have been expected to know of the diabolical impact of CFC's, which will only be fully known in decades to come, but you'd have thought organic chemists working in the field of atmospheric science would have.
- However, undoubtedly the greatest air-pollution threat we have ever faced is climate change. Arrhenius had predicted this global warming phenomenon in the 1890s. I didn't know about that but I did know about the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere by 1973, because I was involved with the EPA and I had seen the data coming from the Mauna Loa Observatory in Hawaii. To my great shame, I laid low for the next 20 years as the evidence steadily accumulated, but gave a couple more informed papers on the subject around 2000. Even then, I was certainly seen as an alarmist when I said that I thought "the survival of civilisation as we know it depends upon finding technical and political solutions to the problem of global warming".

Just like the crowd in the Temple, why is it that we are so blind to changes that are taking place before our very eyes? As I look back on my 76 years, it seems to me that I saw very little of it coming; not the technological change, nor the human stuff and for that I am deeply disappointed in myself. Why are we so blind to both recognising changes and the need for change? Why were those Jews who cross-questioned Jesus so resistant to change? Perhaps, like those folk who resisted Jesus, it is in part to our innate resistance to change. Perhaps we don't like to get out of our comfort zone. Perhaps we don't like to admit we were wrong. Perhaps we don't like a path more challenging.

Yet as followers of Jesus we have a blueprint. Simply put, Jesus tells us that we need to have a heart for the poor and those who are marginalised within our community, across the world and indeed for all of creation. If my own journey has taught me anything, and I suspect yours too as you reflect on it, is that I have only seen the world's failings and my own deep prejudices and shortcomings in hindsight. I hadn't seen the problems of black smoke, acid rain, CFCs and greenhouse gases until their impacts were clear. I hadn't recognised my sidelining of our indigenous Australians or my sexist, homophobic and racist attitudes ran so counter to what the Gospel was telling me. How could I have been so blind, so insensitive; so chillingly wrong? I feel that I've come a long way in these last couple of decades and I suspect on most of these issues, so have you.

But an important question remains. What are our remaining blind spots now? What do we tolerate or even encourage now, that with the privilege of hindsight, will abhor us in years to come? For if living teaches us anything, it teaches us that we have at times been profoundly wrong about many things in our past. But, it has also taught us to not be afraid of change. For change can mean transformation for the better. And could I put in a commercial here for MUC's 'Building Bridges' event in October, which

brings us face to face with some of those who we see on the margins. It is opportunities to engage with people outside our experience and comfort zone that can transform us. But we can only be transformed for the better if we remain grounded in the sorts of messages we get from Jesus – the Sermon on the Mount, loving our neighbour and advocating for the oppressed and marginalised. But it's also about reminding ourselves of the assurance of God's love as we find as so well articulated in the 23rd Psalm. ***The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil; for you are with me; Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*** With that assurance and grounded in the way of Jesus, coping with change, indeed thriving in it, should be a piece of cake.