

**SERMON: 3 November 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper**  
**“All things new”**  
**(Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 21:1-7)**

I remember attending a session on worship led by John Bell. John has written lots of hymns and songs, and is part of the Iona Community’s Wild Goose Worship Group. As a young man I was attracted to John’s wild looks, his long hair and beard, often dressing a bit like a colourful hippy, with a broad Glaswegian accent and he wore this large wooden cross everywhere he went. He was one of many people who helped me to see that church wasn’t all about grey suits and sombre faces.

Anyway the song I remember him teaching us was this:

[SLIDE]

Behold, behold, I make all things new,  
beginning with you, and starting from today.  
Behold, behold, I make all things new,  
my promise is true for I am Christ the Way  
(John L Bell, *Come all you people*)

And I’ve had that song buried deep in my mind ever since, and every now and then it surfaces, like a breath of fresh air.

[SLIDE]

This week’s Spill the Beans material includes a reflection which I thought I’d share with you:

*Making all things new, a clean sheet,  
where would we begin?*

*And how would we stop all that we know already from dictating we create everything the same, unchanging our dissatisfaction with what is.*

*How would we imagine what might be?*

*Do we really want the newness that God promises or would we rather stick with what we know? Dare we imagine all things new?*

*Or would we simply yearn for the past*

*even when we know it will no longer do?*

*Our ways are not God's ways*

*and, unless our plans involve listening carefully to God's purpose for us individually and in community,*

*we cannot help but finish up with what we know and abhor making all things new.*

*Creating that new thing*

*demands courage,*

*demands resilience,*

*demands reliance on the Alpha and the Omega, the God of new and old,*

*the God of all.*

### **The God of new and old. The God who loves both new and old.**

Recently, a middle aged woman called Katharine Venn decided to do something new, something she'd never done before. She took 2 days off work and joined Christian Climate Action and XR in the street protests in London.

Describing herself as someone who never breaks rules, she felt she had to do something radical, having exhausted things like changing her own lifestyle to help the environment and putting regular pressure on her MP and local

councillors. And motivated by her Christian faith, she knew she had to take a stand on this issue, alongside other people who felt equally strongly.

Here's part of what she wrote in a blog afterwards.

"I didn't do the lengthy praying that I was hoping to do. At times it was hugely uncomfortable: not just the embarrassment of it all, or the rain, or the occasional abuse (though this was vastly and surprisingly outnumbered by the shows of support from passersby as well as cyclists and motorists), but how difficult it was to find out what was going on, feeling a bit aimless, useless.

But in among it all we sang, we prayed, we had interesting conversations with police officers, we upheld one another. I somehow missed Eucharist whenever it happened but I took part in a public reaffirmation of baptism vows and allegiance to Jesus in the face of climate breakdown, in a paddling pool in Trafalgar Square.

I don't believe these things were only symbols; I trust that they did something both to me and to the others there with me, and the consequences of those actions will continue to ripple out. Most of all I got the chance to stand alongside people who are awake to what's going on and who are doing something about it, and who understand the extra level of tension that Christian faith brings to it all.

And back in the office I had the longest and most natural conversation about my faith I've ever had in the workplace, simply because a curious colleague had clicked on the link I'd just about been brave enough to include in my out of office message.

Yes, the whole thing has been embarrassing – deeply embarrassing. I hate drawing attention to myself in this kind of way, when I can't actually explain myself. I just have to accept whatever it is that people want to assume about me, from the bemused tourists as we reaffirmed our baptism vows to the van drivers screaming obscenities, telling us to get jobs.

But I'm used to being the least cool person in the room: I've been a Christian my entire life.

Who knows what we will have achieved, if anything. I only know that Christians are not called to be successful; we are called to be faithful.”

(<https://www.greenbelt.org.uk/an-act-of-faith/>)

Our faith in God can drive us to do new things in order to make a difference, to get someone’s attention or make a difference in someone’s life. Sometimes we need to think of radically new ways in which to share our faith.

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I read an article this week by Sir Ken Robinson, an expert in creativity. He said that “the capacity for new thinking and turning old ideas into new applications has never been more important”.

(<https://www.ashoka.org/en-gb/story/surviving-modern-world-conversation-sir-ken-robinson>)

Which reminded me of something that Jesus said,

[SLIDE]

*“Every disciple of the kingdom is like a householder who draws out from his storage room, things both old and new” — Matthew 13:52.*

Its really important to keep our faith fresh, and as Jesus suggests, to take what we need from the old as well as the new. We mustn’t let the church become an antique shop preserving old things. We must build on the faith of the past - the love of God, the foundation of our faith, the Alpha, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus - and translate our faith into the new language that we hear people speak today. We must keep the church ever new, and pay heed to God’s call, behold I am making all things new.

The reformers of the 16th Century new the importance of this in their call that the church reformed must always be transforming - *ecclesia reformata ecclesia semper reformanda est.*

We live in a fast changing world - scientific change, technological change, political change, economic change, social change even psychological and theological change. Many of the things we thought we knew are being shaken, like our understanding of this evolving universe that we are part of.

I was blown away watching an episode of “The Planets” with Professor Brian Cox; showing how small and insignificant this tiny planet we call earth is; one planet in one galaxy in light of the billions of other galaxies that are out there. And yet, even Brian Cox, can’t rule out that there just might be a Benevolent Creator and Sustainer behind it all, making things new.

[SLIDE]

“Look! I am creating new heavens and a new earth - so wonderful that no one will ever think about the old ones anymore” (Isaiah 65:17).

God wants everyone not just to know about this newness, but to be a part of it. Jesus began the new kingdom of God and he chose the Church to be the expression of this heavenly kingdom on earth. And where the Church has been unwilling to be that expression then the Lord reveals his love in other places and in other people; until the Bride is dressed and ready.

Quaker pastor Philip Gulley, has written a book with a great title - [SLIDE] *If the Church Were Christian: Rediscovering the Values of Jesus* (HarperOne: 2010).

Recognising that the Church isn’t yet perfect, and it won’t be until there is room for everyone, he lists 10 values which I think can help us mature in our faith together. They’re not 10 new commandments but they read a bit like a party manifesto, which is maybe appropriate in this election season. Here they are:[SLIDE]

1. Jesus is a model for living more than an object of worship.
2. Affirming people’s potential is more important than reminding them of their brokenness.

3. The work of reconciliation should be valued over making judgments.
4. Gracious behaviour is more important than right belief.
5. Inviting questions is more valuable than supplying answers.
6. Encouraging the personal search is more important than group uniformity.
7. Meeting actual needs is more important than maintaining institutions.
8. Peacemaking is more important than power.
9. We should care more about love and less about sex.
10. Life in this world is more important than the afterlife (Eternity is God's work anyway).

(adapted from *Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation*, 1/11/19)

There might be one thing from this list that might challenge us to rethink something, to change up, to modify a behaviour, to help a relationship, or help us in some way to discover something new to go alongside the old.

God's kingdom is coming and part of that coming is our being made ready, like a beautiful bride prepared for her husband, to spend eternity with God at the centre of all things, in a state of perfect justice and peace. We don't know exactly how that will work or what that will look like but we trust that this long journey begins with the small steps that each of us take today and everyday.

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