

Wk Prayer Xn U 2012

A new hymn book was introduced into a Church and someone asked the curmudgeonly organist what he thought. He decided to quote from 'Abide with me': "change and decay in all around I see"

Some words carry a weight of associations and emotions with them. Take 'freedom'. *Freedom* is a splendid, powerful, dare I say iconic word of our times. Freedom is indeed to be welcomed and appreciated and protected. Freedom is about opportunity and possibilities and escape from restriction and repression: and those are all very good things. However, in our freedom to make choices there are still good choices and bad choices. We can make choices which are selfish and destructive and which are hurtful to others. Freedom is indeed a precious thing; but not all freely made decisions are good decisions. There is a world of difference between the anarchic licentiousness of late modernity and the glorious liberty of the children of God. Our freedom is the freedom and capacity to do God's will.

'Change' is another loaded word. But I suspect that often change is loaded with negative feelings. Change can be unwelcome. Change can be fearful. Change can be imposed as a burden laid on us by others, change can happen through circumstances beyond anyone's control.

Change and decay: It all somehow links to the second law of thermodynamics. In a finite system you not only cannot get more out than you put in but rather you can't even get that much, there is always some element of inefficiency which means that there is always some waste, some disorder, some loss. This tendency to loss and chaos is what the physicists would call entropy. And entropy is always on the increase;

the entropy of the universe tends to a maximum. Perpetual motion machines are pipedreams; they all run down and lose momentum.

However, for all the negative baggage of change, there can also be positives. Growth is a form of change. Learning is a form of change. To move from the bad to the good is change. To move from the good to the better is change. To move from the better to the best is change. To use Christian terminology: conversion, salvation and sanctification are forms of change. These changes are not things to fear, but things to welcome.

But if I can bring in another element to the second law of thermodynamics: Entropy is reversed when energy is introduced into the system. If energy is fed in, then the equations change. Instead of inevitable decay, we can see things being built up. Instead of inexorable chaos we can see good order grow. Instead of corruption, we can see flourishing.

Change to the Christian is something that pre-eminently happens when God's infinite goodness reverses the trend of finite inefficiencies and waste. God's love and grace bring something new into the cycle of decay. There is something which lifts us from cynicism into hope.

The key theme given to us by our brothers and sisters in Christ from Poland this year is taken from St Paul. *We shall all be changed by the victory of Christ*. 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 speaks of the transformative power of faith in Christ, particularly in relation to our praying for the visible unity of the Church, the Body of Christ. As we pray for and strive towards the full visible unity of the church we - and the traditions to which we belong - will be changed, transformed and conformed to the likeness of Christ. This is an exciting vision but it may fill us with some

fear! The unity for which we pray may require the renewal of forms of Church life with which we are familiar. Such unity is not merely a “comfortable” notion of friendliness and co-operation. It requires a willingness to dispense with competition between us. We need to open ourselves to each other, to offer gifts to and receive gifts from one another, so that we might truly enter into the new life in Christ, which is the only true victory.

The life-giving power of God will change us; and it is only in this gracious input of Divine energy that the tensions and limits of our humanity and our tendency to disorder and chaos can be transformed by the splendour of God’s New Creation. It is the influx of God’s eternal and changeless immortality which will reverse our death-bound drift towards chaos. And thanks be to God, he will be faithful, he has given us the victory in Christ. Let our changes be constructive changes through hope in God’s mercy and love and not the changes of fear and decay.

A double edged sword of change hangs over the ecumenical movement today. It is clear there are changes afoot. It is possible to view those changes as decay. It may be that the enthusiasm and commitment and dynamism that marked the ecumenical movement of a generation ago are not there or are dissipating. Indeed the pioneers of the ecumenical movement have gone to their reward and many of their successors are no longer as young as they were, although to be fair several are still impressively energetic. Ambitious visions seem to have diminished into a smaller scale. Grand schemes of re-union have merged into focussed co-operation upon issues and projects.

However, change can also be about growth. There has been a normalisation by which it is presumed that Christian communities will

work together. There may no longer be a buzz of excitement of doing something novel, rather this is the way we do normal business. There has been a maturing of relationships, even to the point of being able to voice substantial disagreements. There has been good work done. We should be thankful for the achievements gained and committed to building upon them for a positive future.

At our next meeting of the Churches Together in North Mymms committee, we shall discuss the ‘future of Churches Together in North Mymms’. Do we continue as we are and do the things we have been doing? Do we cut our coat according to our cloth and do the things within our reach, even if this means doing fewer things than once we did? Do we take the brave step of saying that Churches Together has come to a natural end and we need new spaces in which to work together with less formal structures and fewer committees? Do we need a new influx of energy and ideas from new people able to develop positive growth? And if we need that, are there the new people and new energies out there? These are questions for all of us: they are questions for the Churches Together in North Mymms Committee, they are questions for the proper consultative and decision making bodies in the various communities, they are questions for each of you here, and for those of our communities who have chosen not to be here.

One thing is clear. Change will happen. Our challenge is that the changes we go through should be about us choosing the right path.

Above all our hope is that we shall be changed by our faith in our faithful God and through the impulse of his gracious Spirit of love.

We shall be changed by the victory of Christ.