

SERMON – 10/9/23**'New Wine/New Wineskins'**

Luke 5:33-39

“No-one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins” (Luke 5:37-38)

We live in a world where certain laws apply and certain forces hold sway. Isaac Newton reputedly discovered the law of gravity the hard way when he was knocked on the head by a falling apple and starting wondering why things always fall *downwards*. But there are other laws and forces at work in the world that we are perhaps not so conscious of, spiritual forces like the force that makes people feel better if they are *doing* something or the force that seems to compel people to cling to the familiar.

There is something about us human beings that makes us prefer what we are used to, to the suggestion that there might be a better way of doing things – and that is writ large in the church. A joke that I laugh wryly at goes like this: How many church members does it take to change a lightbulb? To which the answer is given: *Change?* We are all pretty good at digging our heels in and refusing to accept what we are not used to.

The retiring national convenor of the Guild writes the following about this year's theme – New Wine/New Wineskins. “When wine is new, it is in a state of fermentation. It bubbles and expands as the fermentation gases are released. A fresh, pliable wineskin can absorb such expansion and slowly age-with the wine until the fermentation process is complete. To put fresh wine into an old wineskin, however, is asking for trouble. The old wineskin has assumed a definite shape and is no longer pliable. It is fixed and somewhat brittle. The activity of new wine will stress it beyond its ability to yield. And so both the wine and the skin are lost.”

At a time when the Church of Scotland is taking a very hard look at its structures, the parallel is clear – we are in danger of losing

both the wine and the wineskin, the very Gospel itself along with the buildings and traditions we have inherited.

In the short passage we read from Luke's Gospel this morning there are actually three separate (albeit related) sayings of Jesus about how the Gospel challenges the laws and forces of this world. First of all Jesus challenges the presumption of the disciples of John the Baptist and of the Pharisees that in order to be walking with God you need to be *doing* something religious, like fasting. Even though only one day of fasting a year was spoken about in the Law of Moses – the Day of Atonement – by the time of Jesus a complicated routine of weekly fasts had been developed that the Pharisees made sure people knew about. While the disciples of John the Baptist were very different from the Pharisees in their attitudes, they had obviously taken up the practice of fasting as a sign of their faith and devotion to God, but here Jesus is pointing out that just as you wouldn't deny yourself through fasting at a time of great joy like a family wedding (which of course in those days went on for the best part of a week) so the presence of the Son of God with His disciples is cause for the kind of celebration that pushes fasting and self-denial into the shadows. The time would come when Jesus' disciples would face hardship in the work of the Gospel and when the need to pray in humility before God would be paramount, but now was not that time.

Secondly, though, Jesus finds two different ways to challenge the view that you can make satisfactory progress in life by the process of 'make do and mend' – constantly patching up or refilling the old rather than making a clean break and beginning afresh. Many of us will have a favourite item of clothing, something that just feels so comfortable that you cannot bear to part with it because you just know you are never going to find anything quite like it again. The trouble is that while it may be comfortable it is also imperceptibly becoming shabby and the thing is while *you* may not notice everyone around you does. Is it not also the case with much of what we are comfortable with as a church – we try to patch the old with something new and all that happens is that we have spoiled the new yet still not matched the old.

The coming of Jesus brings something so totally new that it simply cannot be held within the existing framework, and that is as true today as it was when Christ first walked the earth, which means that the Church of Jesus Christ must never be allowed to become a fossilised institution where our practices, however well-intentioned and even biblically inspired become the focus of our efforts. The church must never be allowed to become a garment that we are so comfortable in that we never want to change or renew it and that we spend all our energies patching up to look like it used to.

The protestant reformers had a slogan that bears repeating five centuries after it was first coined – *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda* – a reformed church always in need of reform. Our reformed church is certainly in need of reform today – so how are we to take the church we have inherited and allow us to become the church that will be the vessel for the good news of Christ to our generation?

Some of you will remember the Church Without Walls report that was presented to the General Assembly of 2001. It had a big impact on the Church of Scotland at the time but more than twenty years on its unheeded insights still have something to contribute to the ongoing work of renewal and reformation today. I make no apology for quoting at length something of what the Convenor said in presenting the report.

“[In the report...] we have addressed the structures of the mind rather than organisation and procedures. In this we follow Jesus' way when He called for new wineskins for the new wine – challenging mindsets that could not see the Kingdom way. Old mindsets in new structures multiply old problems.

Picture communities of Christian people wrestling with the call of Jesus Christ, helping each other live out the Gospel story in daily life. Picture local communities of faith where all generations find a home. Picture a new generation set free to create new churches from the ground up.

Forget petty worship wars and the systems that suck our energy. Picture a crowd of people with Jesus at the centre, following where Jesus takes them. Picture Jesus introducing us to the

people in the community He would call friends – and there the Church without Walls gathers round. Picture rich and poor in just relationships, with local church and global church as partners in a movement of alternative globalisation.

Times have changed. Our 19th century model of mission was simple; one minister in one building in one parish. Throughout the 20th century that model has creaked and groaned as congregations have united, ministers have become fewer and life has become less settled. And yet the old mindset lives on as the assumed norm, chastising us as we struggle to make it work. It is time to let it go.

Picture our society: push button, quick click, multiple choice lifestyles with designer identities. People meet in cafes and clubs, in markets and shopping centres. Patterns of belonging and believing are more fluid. A Church without Walls meets people where they are and accompanies them as friends – like Jesus on the Emmaus road, listening to the dreams and disillusionment, gently setting this dislocated life in the redeeming story of suffering and resurrection and sharing the hospitality of a supper table where Christ makes His surprise appearance.

In this society we picture a simpler Church of fellow-travellers, 'strugglers anonymous' in a bruising world. This is a Church of hospitality and where the Word of God is given a chance to burn in the hearts of those who are unlikely to sit in a pew to hear it. This is a Church for the adventurers who rise to the challenge of a world renewed in righteousness by God and for God as creation is healed.

Such a Church will have learned the art of Christian friendship: so committed to the other that we let go our cherished ways for the sake of strangers who might become friends – our friends and the friends of Jesus; and so transparently honest about God that we give away what we have come to know of God's love in every way we can.

The supporting and equipping of such a church will take many types of people; pastors helping others to care, youth workers helping young people to find their voice, evangelists taking us to the borderlands of faith and doubt, communicators who are at

home with the website and the mixing desk, teachers who can open Scripture to life and life to Scripture, artists who touch places others cannot reach, contemplatives and intercessors who teach us to pray. In a word, teamwork. It will take a community of leaders to build a community of God's people who will offer a sign of God's healing community in a fractured world."

Those words were penned nearly quarter of a century ago and yet we are still intent on trying to pour new wine into old wineskins, trying to make half the number of ministers there were then plug the leaking vessel, still trying to make do and mend while the comfortable old clothes become shabbier and shabbier, still trying to go through the religious motions while the King of glory is still knocking unheeded at the door to invite us to the feast. Are we ready to let God shake us out of the comfort zone and call us to take up the new wineskins that will allow the new wine of the Kingdom to flow and bring life in its fulness to all in our community, in our nation and in our world?

The new wine is bursting the old wineskins, it's running out and the wineskins we are still trying to patch will be good for nothing.