

Reflection

Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

Matthew 25:1-13

I've been thinking quite a bit over the last few weeks about change and transition. You see, while I was on leave I did the first half of a course on "foundations of transitional ministry." This half focused on the work of the leader and, among other issues, explored the differences between change and transition.

Change is about the practical side of things. I'm sure we have all been involved in organisations that have gone through times of change. Perhaps a new procedure needed implementing, or two offices were consolidated into one. Transition, on the other hand, is the psychological journey that makes the difference between rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic, and creating something that is lasting. Transition starts, not with the something new, but with the ending of the old and recognising all this ending means.

Our three readings today are all either about or written to communities undergoing transition. We hear of the generational change that occurs at the end of Joshua's life (probably written to the community in Exile, who are experiencing the sudden life-disruption this involved).

Up to this point, the story tells of the Israelites having a divinely appointed leader who had direct access to God. This model of leadership meant the community had little thinking to do about who was the leader and why. They just had to follow the person and not think too much for themselves. But what about when there is no divinely appointed leader and the community has to discern who will take them in God's direction?

In today's reading we hear Joshua's last speech to the Israelites. In Hebrew writing, the final speech was often where the important themes of a person's story were summed up. The story shows the themes and now the author makes it explicit for a nice easy take-a-way. Joshua reminds people to follow Yahweh. It is as simple (and as difficult) as that. In a world where multiple gods were the norm and those gods were assumed to be territorial, Joshua reminds the people that only one counts – Yahweh.

Paul's letter to the community at Thessalonica is one of his earliest, which makes it among the earliest books in the New Testament. The recipients are among that very early generation of Christians who expected that Christ would return before they died. But that expectation did not get fulfilled. Some members of their congregation have died and this might be connected to the persecution they have recently experienced. What does this mean for their faith?

This is a community who needs transition and not simply a change to their faith. They need to make sense of why their expectations were crumbling if

they are going to hold onto their faith. How do they understand their faith in this new and frightening context?

The recipients of Matthew's Gospel are in a similar predicament, but for different reasons. They were Jewish-Christians, having been very much part of the local Jewish communities, attending the weekly Synagogue worship and celebrating the old feasts. After the fall of Jerusalem in 70CE, they were thrown out of the Synagogues and viewed as heretics and an anathema to the community. Like the church in Thessalonica, these Christians also had to rethink and reframe their faith.

The story of the Bridesmaids reads a bit like a tale told on a comedy night. Where would markets be open in the small hours of the morning? How could the bridegroom not recognise his new wife's friends? The first audience must have laughed at this story. But it is a story that makes them laugh, then makes them think, particularly in their context.

Often this story is preached on with a topic of being ready for God to come. However, the Greek word used here for "lamp" is the same word that in the Septuagint – the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures – is also used for the presence of God. The lamps and the oil become symbols of the ongoing presence of God. These first readers would have known this and would have understood the story to be about keeping alight the fragile lamp of the presence of God in their troubling times. That is a light that keeps shining, even when the old traditions and old ideas are no longer helpful.

We are in a similar space, though hopefully not one that is as traumatic as any of the communities behind today's readings. There is an increasing recognition that the old ways are not working in our current context. If we are worshipping God and not tradition, then we can recognise – as these three biblical communities did – that we need new ways to keep the light of God's presence alive today.

Change starts with a beginning, but transition starts with an ending – the giving up of what was. The next important stage in transition is not the something new, but rather the "neutral zone." It is the time in between where we use the unsettled and anxious feeling of not really knowing what is going to happen next. But this unsettled experience can give us creativity and deepen our exploration so that when we get to the point of starting something new it is not simply rearranging the deck chairs, but rather a transformation – a resurrection.

Often I finish sermons with a question for reflection or a call to action, but instead today let me simply finish with a word of encouragement. This might feel like an unsettled time, but hang in there – together we will journey through this neutral zone and in the fullness of time move towards a time of new possibilities.