

St Olave Sermon, Trinity 4. July 5th, 2020. Malcolm Grundy

This has been a week of slogans and symbols for me. The travel industry decided on SOS - Save Our Summers! Our government has tried to light a 'Fire of Freedom' for Hong Kong. The 4th of July has of course been 'Independence Day' in the USA. Now we have our own 'Independence Day' a time when travel and more meetings can begin. Some church services might be attempted - but definitely no up-too-close singing!

Both sets of readings today are about changing a lifestyle. For St Paul it was the frustration of not moving in the direction he wanted. Then there is the even greater frustration expressed by Jesus about others not understanding what both he and John the Baptist were trying to do.

Once we have celebrated the 72nd anniversary of the birth of the NHS with the wonderful rainbow symbol the slogan for this coming week will continue to be 'The New Normal'.

It is likely to be an uncomfortable normal for many people.

On the other hand, figures from a survey by the Office for National Statistics suggest more than four in 10 adults in Britain feel some parts of their lives have changed *for the better* since the coronavirus outbreak.

More than half of those surveyed said they were able to spend more quality time with loved ones they live with.

Exactly half said they were enjoying this slower pace of life.

This Covid outbreak prompted 28 per cent of adults in that survey to plan "big changes" in their lives when the recovery begins.

So, for us in the churches there is a new challenge - how can we respond to those who want a change in their life? We already know that far more than our average congregation number are 'tuning in' to our Sunday broadcast services. How will it be possible to develop this goodwill?

We start with - what do you want? It is the question Jesus asks in today's Gospel. He says, John was a solitary, prayerful ascetic, you did not like him - I sit with all kinds of people and share their meals and you criticise me for it. Will you never be satisfied!

The truth is that today, just like the torn-in-two St Paul and those who heard Jesus, people need different supports for faith at different times in life's journey.

At the moment, across the country, there is a bombardment of ideas about what the 'new normal' for church services will be - and who knows. For some time to come I see a 'mixed economy' of broadcast services with just

a few said ones in church. In both I hope to see more creative ways in which we develop our proven expertise in music. I expect, when home visits are possible, a development in our pastoral care.

Perhaps we should have an online enquiry form on our website for our non-members. We can then build into our services and sermons responses to their questions.

The main aim for St Paul in his wrestling with his conscience was to learn how to do the right thing. For Jesus and John the Baptist the aim was to draw people towards a deeper faith in God by word and by example. They knew that whatever they did would arouse criticism. Just as whatever we do to change our church services will have the same effect!

All spiritual growth is a challenge. One mystic has said that spiritual growth is like climbing a ladder where sometimes the rungs are too far apart, and you have to take a leap of faith - or be helped up by others!

To end where I began: perhaps as a congregation as we take new leaps in faith, we need a new strapline ready for when our new vicar comes. There is a slogan popular on both sides of the Atlantic which we could adapt.

To grow into the 'New Normal', do we need a 'New Deal'. After that we might go on to the even more contemporary,

'Let's Make St Olave's Great Again'.