

Change

Third Sunday in Advent

'Change and decay in all around I see.'

These words, from the hymn Abide with me, give a fascinating insight into how the author, Henry Lyte and many others see change: it is the same as decay. Change is bad.

But there are other ways we can see change: 'a change is as good as a rest' is a popular expression of a more positive view of change. That is why we go on holiday – for a change. All that tells us is that some people like change and some do not - but you probably knew that already. But it reminds us that when we consider the value of change we need to be aware of our own personal preferences. Those who dislike change must be careful not to oppose it just because they don't like it. And those who like change must be careful that they do not support it just because they do like it.

Some change is good. Some change is necessary. For example a child which remained in the womb much beyond nine months would die; and if Morrison's was still selling groceries over a counter and dealing in cash as it did in 1899 it would not be a national supermarket chain.

Even in the Christian church change is necessary for it to thrive and even survive. Consider the changes seen in this community over the last five hundred years alone. In the matter of language used in public worship:

- we have moved from praying and reading the bible in Latin to using English;
- we have exchanged the C16th English of Shakespeare's time to modern English;
- those who put together parish orders of service now need to choose between the dignified language of *The Times* or *The Guardian* and the more popularist language of the *Daily Mail* or even **The Sun**

In the matter of furniture, altars have moved from the east end to the nave and back again at least twice

In the shape of the building

- the three levels nave, chancel and sanctuary were abandoned at the reformation in favour of a single squarer space;
- the late nineteenth century went back to the three level style
- the twentieth century went back to the square even circular shape just after this church was built.

The reasons for the changes have sometimes been in response to changes in the world around us; and sometimes as a result of changes in how we think, changes of theological perspective within the church. And sometimes it is hard to tell one from another.

And so it is that over the last few years we have changed the way that we worship here at St James. The fashion now, as in the C16th is for an altar in the middle of a church. It is difficult to achieve that in this building but we have moved the altar nearer to us. In the next few weeks we will make further changes:

- All the furniture in the chancel will be removed;
- The whole of chancel will be carpeted
- The altar will be placed in the middle of the chancel;
- Chairs will be placed behind it for midweek services
- The altar rails from the east end will be shorted and placed on the chancel step

This will allow the empty south aisle to be used in whatever way we choose. The churchwardens pews have already been removed from the back of church creating a second flexible space

This is change but not decay. Some people will like it because it is change. Some people will dislike it because it is change. We must live with that. The key question is whether it is change for the right reason.

I believe it is. For many years we have been aware that this building is showing its age. There will come a time when we will need to spend serious money on its' repairs. As things stand at present the only people who have any responsibility to finance that are us. If you worship at St Wilfrid's Calverley you can apply for heritage grants because your mediaeval church is a listed building. If you worship at St Margaret Thornbury you can apply for grants for community use because it is used for secular purposes. We have neither of those advantages. We can do nothing about the historical significance of this building. But we can do something about using it for the whole community. For some years we have intended to use this space for secular community activities. And in the last year we have – for karate, yoga on a regular basis. The changes we are in the process of making will free up space at the back of church and in the south aisle for community activities which in the long run will make this building more sustainable. In that sense these changes are conservative because they will make it possible to keep this building open. The radical alternative would have been to demolish and begin again.

I also believe the worship will be enhanced. In the long run a set of empty choir stalls behind the altar simply draws attention to the lack of a choir; an unused altar at the east end suggests that the present arrangement is just a short term temporary fix. Removing them makes it clear that this is how we mean it to be. This is what we want.

Occasionally people have asked me whether this means we will never have a choir again. It does not. If we want a choir and there are people willing to sing and someone willing to train them, we will have a choir. If we want them to be robed, they will be robed. If we want them to sit in the chancel they will sit in the chancel - but not on those particular pews because they will be gone. But there are many other good places for choirs to sit: I have seen them sit in the middle of the congregation; I have seen them sit at the back of the congregation. The matter is quite open.

But using the church for secular events is not just about raising money and making the building more sustainable financially. It is also about good stewardship. For all that this church is open through the daytime it

is extremely underused. There are few community buildings in this immediate area. To use this space to serve the local community is a proper and desirable Christian activity. It is part of our mission.

It is in a sense about ensuring that the tree bears fruit – and we know from today's; gospel reading that John the Baptist was pretty hot on that. We know from the parable of the talents that Jesus could be angry about his followers playing safe and encouraged those who took risks. John urged those who would listen to be ready for the coming of the Lord, ready for the day of judgment. And those who heard him asked a natural question: what do we do? John's answer varied according to who he was speaking to: the wealthy, the tax collectors, soldiers. I have no doubt that he would tell the Church Council of Woodhall and Waterloo to make the best use possible of the building we have been given. I believe we are doing just that and that if Jesus were to return tomorrow we could look him in the eye and know at we have done his will

N Clews

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