

Emerging

by Rev Dan Balsdon, Sunday 5th July 2020 | read online at www.revdanbalsdon.com

Over the last fortnight...the same verse of the Bible has kept coming up all over the place for me.

Now when this happens for me, I always know God is saying something. The Bible is so huge – 66 books, 1189 chapters, over 31,000 verses. So, for the same little bit to keep popping up in the space of a fortnight...

That's no coincidence – it's a God-incidence.

*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.
I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*

Isaiah 43:18-19

I think there is something attractive and comforting about this verse because it can easily be seen to speak into our current living. The former 'old normal' that we remember cannot simply resume or return, and so we prepare for a new thing as we begin to embrace a 'new normal'.

But that may be being slightly too simplistic. The journey from old normal to new normal is not a simple transaction. It is not a straight swap. It is not the same as my journey one day this week to change from one pair of shorts to another because the button popped off...

Embracing whatever this new normal will become is a journey in itself. And I think we are merely at the very beginning of new normal's formation. It is going to take time to explore and experience. Some of us may be excited and desperate to step out, others may be taking very tentative steps, and others, not wanting to take a step at all.

When we look at the story behind those two verses in Isaiah 43, we see a similar journey. After being exiled and in Babylon for some time, the prospect of 'returning' to Israel was a scary and uncertain prospect. Many of those who were fit and young now would have been born in exile, so Babylon may well have felt like home, even though not their true home of course. To leave Babylon would break something of the limited security and familiarity they had.

For some of us, there may also be a sense of uncertainty about breaking security. As hard as it has been, living in lockdown and not leaving our homes except when essential, 100+ days on there is also a sense of coming to terms with it. Life has adjusted as we live in our own Babylon, and the idea of leaving the safety and security of home and entering what we may perceive as a dangerous wilderness where much is not as we remember it, may not feel as attractive to us as we wish it did.

For others of us, we may be really excited. We may see now as a time when there is potential for real change, where we can embrace new ideas and new ways of being, and really contribute towards the shape of our communities and their direction of travel. That through lockdown we will have been forced to learn new ways of being church, community and nation and we see real potential for this experience to transform the future.

Ok, so I've created an unfair contrast there. You may find it helpful, but I imagine at least some of us will identify with aspects of both of those characterisations but wouldn't put ourselves in either. It may be more helpful to see these as points on a spectrum, a spectrum within which we swing our pendulum, feeling different about it all day by day.

But what this verse does remind us is that for those in exile, the memory of Israel was just that, a memory. What was had gone, their ancestors had died, they were the next generation and the former things were just that, former things. If unchecked, they could become an idealized world that overshadowed the reality of the present, and emerging future. A future within which God was doing a new thing that was already beginning to spring forth. Hope was not a possibility. It could be perceived, experienced and known.

It is that reality that we must hold on to. We must not let our memories of the old normal become an idealized past which holds us back from the future. A future in which God is already springing forth and making the way in the wilderness, even in the wilderness of risk assessments!

Today some churches will be opening their doors again, though many are not. Some of that is, I think out of fear. And some of that fear may be irrational, but much is totally rational. Coronavirus has not gone away.

Some of the 'not yet' is because of the practical fact that we have only had a week since the government guidance finally arrived and there is still time needed to process and implement it.

But some runs deeper. The reality of what is emerging as the 'new normal' means we have to carefully think through what the purpose of a church building is now. The church building was a key tool in facilitating gathering as community, worshiping together as one people, being united as the body of Christ. But it is just those things, when physically together to share fellowship, sing at the tops of our lungs and share stories with one another face to face, that coronavirus also seeks to exploit.

So just as the exiled were anxious, required God's reassurance, and needed time to be ready for the next steps on the journey, so we need that time too. Time to work out who we are and what we are for. To ask God to aid us in working out how we use the resources we have to the best of our ability to continue to proclaim the gospel message of love and salvation. To continue being God's chosen people in the emerging new normal.

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?