

Change happens

Has anybody here heard of a chap called Zeno? He sounds a bit like a character from Star Trek, but actually he was a Greek philosopher who lived around 500 years before Christ. Zeno of Elea became famous for what has been called Zeno's paradoxes. The most famous one is about Achilles and the tortoise.

Achilles and a tortoise decided to have a race and Achilles thought it would be a good idea to give the poor tortoise a 10-metre head start. By using logic alone Zeno set out to prove that it was impossible for Achilles to ever win because if Achilles could run 10 times faster than the tortoise, by the time he had run 10 metres to catch up with the tortoise then the tortoise will have run 1 metre, by the time Achilles runs this metre, the tortoise will have run a tenth of a metre, each time Achilles reaches the position where the tortoise had been, the tortoise will have moved some distance, so Achilles will never be able to catch up. That at least was the theory.

This was all part of a debate that was one of the earliest in Greek philosophy about change and permanence. Some philosophers believed that the only reality was change. "You can't step into the same river twice" was one of their sayings, others like Zeno tried to prove that reality does not change and that all change is an illusion, hence Achilles and the Tortoise, he knew it was absurd, but that is the point. One interesting thing that came out of this debate is that in an attempt to answer some of these questions, another Greek thinker called Democritus worked out a theory that the universe is composed

of elements which didn't change, although they did move around forming different shapes, which is why things appear to change. He called these elements 'atoms.' He wasn't far wrong was he?

But you will all be glad to know that I am not going to talk about Greek philosophy, the point is that perhaps many of us will secretly agree with Zeno.

He did not like change, and most of us don't like it either.

We like things to remain the way they are, the way they have always been. We feel more comfortable that way. One of the first things a minister or Pastor hears when trying to introduce some changes into the church, is "but we have always done things that way, why should we change?" Change for change sake of course does no good, I remember hearing one visiting preacher at a church in Gibraltar declaring that every church should be always changing and that they should have a sign outside the door proclaiming, "constant change is here to stay!" I think I know what he was trying to say, we can't after all stay stuck in the past, but I can hardly imagine anything more unsettling for any church, or any organisation for that matter, than to have to cope with constant change. That church eventually split up into lots of much smaller and conflicting churches. It wasn't the only reason but I am convinced to this day that the attempt to put that preachers advice into practice and bring in constant change was one of the major reasons for the problems.

As individual Christians of course, we are called to change.

"I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to

possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.” (Php 3:12-14 NLT)

Change.

Jesus himself told his disciples:

Matt 18:3 I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The difference between a dead piece of rock and a living tree is that the tree grows, changes, matures.

I remember as a young Christian thinking that once I had been around for a number of years, I would inevitably grow into a strong effective believer. I had read biographies of men and women who had done great things for God and hoped that one day I might be like them.

The Catholic Church calls people like this 'Saints', Protestants prefer to use terms like 'Great men and women of God' or 'Heroes of the faith.' People who, in the words of William Carey, “believed great things from God and attempted great things for God”. William Carey himself was one of the pioneers of that powerful missionary movement of the nineteenth century that sent people like Hudson Taylor to China, David Livingstone and C T Studd to Africa, and many more. These are men and women who founded missions, Churches, and who have brought thousands to Christ.

People like this had to experience great changes in their lives, both within as they let go of old habits, fears, and ways of

thinking, and without as they battled with all the obstacles put in their way, sadly very often by other Christians.

I think that sometimes at the back of our minds is the idea that to 'go on to perfection' is to achieve the big things like this and if we don't then we are somehow failing God. The problem is that once we believe we are failing God then why bother to 'go on to perfection' at all, let's just settle into our comfortable routines, I am never going to make any big difference in the world - why change?

I must confess that in most cases I prefer the word Saint than terms like 'Great man of God' or 'Heroes of the faith'. These terms seem to imply the accomplishing of some great and difficult task, whereas 'Saint' speaks more of their character, of what they are like as people.

In one sense of course, the biblical sense, we are already saints, all of us, the moment we believe in Jesus. It is the term the New Testament use for believers, but we are also called to change, become more Christ-like in our behaviour and in our lifestyle so that our lives reflect and honour the life and teachings of Jesus himself.

Sometimes people have might think, and I must confess that I have some sympathy, that it is difficult enough to simply go on being a Christian in this world, let alone to grow, and change, because of all the problems and difficulties on the way.

Sometimes changes occur which are not welcome, not good, bad things DO happen to good people, and these things can easily cause us to doubt God.

We have just begun the Alpha Course again, we had our first session last week, and two of the guests as they were

introducing themselves, confessed that they had once had a relationship with God, that they had known Jesus, but had now lost their faith and could feel the emptiness in their lives as a result of it. I got the impression that this change in their relationship with God happened as a result of unwelcome changes in their lives.

Our lives are full of obstacles, difficult family situations, or demanding jobs and so on. It may be the case that we face all sorts of problems and difficulties in our lives things that become 'stumbling blocks' in our relationship with God, but these stumbling blocks, can also be stepping stones on our journey. God can allow things to happen *to* us so that other things can happen *in* us.

It is not the nature of our difficulties, but how we handle them that will help us to grow and go on in the Lord. Because its not what WE DO BUT WHAT WE ARE that Jesus is interested in.

I believe that there are many saints, all over the world, who may never start a mission, or pioneer a church or write a hymn, or a book, but who *are* going on into perfection, and have laid hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of them.

What has Jesus laid hold of us for? What does this rather cryptic phrase actually mean?

For Paul it meant it to experience the power of his resurrection, to experience hope in the midst of despair, power in the midst of weakness, life in the midst of death. All of this required change, it required leaving the old behind, and reaching forward to the new. But it also brings new meaning into our lives, it means that even if we are chained to the kitchen sink, or to some boring desk job, it means we can still lead exciting

and meaningful lives, because God is at work in us. For some people it might mean changing our circumstances, leaving our homes but not necessarily. For all of us though, it will mean *forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead*, So we are called to change and grow. But remember these early Greeks? They believed that the universe was unchanging. It led Zeno to make all sorts of illogical conclusions.

Yet I believe that somehow he was right.

Human beings cannot cope with constant change, we need some form of continuity, permanence to give us the confidence to change.

Zeno thought that the universe at its heart didn't change, and in a sense he was right, not about the universe, but about the creator of the universe. Because there is one thing that does not change, that will never change.

Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. Said the Apostle James, Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

Forty-one times we read in the Bible the phrase 'his love endures forever.'

We can endure unwelcome change, and we can want to change, because of one simple truth: God does not change. His promises to us are always going to be kept. He will always remain faithful.

In the words that old hymn...

"Change and decay in all around I see

O thou who changes not Abide with me."

Some changes are voluntary, some are forced on us, but Gods love will always abide with us.