

19 October 2019

**Perceiving A New Thing (Isaiah 43: 18-21)**

*Viriditas – Inaugural Service at St Ninian’s*

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Well, here we are – *here* we are! After months, years really, of imagining, conversing, wondering, testing, discerning, we find ourselves having arrived – in a new space, on the cusp of a new rhythm of life, new relationships, new possibilities. Feeling, perhaps, a bit odd, a bit dislocated ... feeling, hopefully also, a sense of anticipation, expectancy, openness. Here we are ... and perhaps we can take another moment to breathe into this here and now-ness, this space that will become our new home.

‘Behold, I am doing a new thing’. The reading we’ve just heard is one I’ve chosen for this, our inaugural service at St Ninian’s, with a little trepidation. On the one hand, it’s a reading that encourages beginnings, that imagines God profoundly committed to generate newness of life. It seems obviously apt. On the other hand, and for just this reason, it’s a reading that could seem coercive and trite. Coercive in the sense that it forbids looking back: ‘Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old’. And trite in the sense that, well of course I’d be looking for divine legitimation of our new venture. See – we must be on the right track. It says so, in the bible! Yet just because the prophet Isaiah encouraged ancient Israel to trust in the possibility of new life out of exile in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, who says this is a word for us, or that we can apply it directly to our circumstances?

But I guess, in the end, what drew me to this passage for tonight, what made it seem worth the risk, was the way it imagines how God is and acts, and so how we’re called to be in relation to this reality. It’s a passage that reminds us, connects us to some essential truths of our life as God’s people – and this seems an important remembering to begin with and from.

Some essential truths of our life as God's people ... Truth number one. God is at work, God is active in the world. 'I am about to do a new thing'. Always and everywhere, God is about to do a new thing because it is the nature of God to create, to generate life and yet more life. There's a crude way of hearing this ... God as some super-agent, busily interfering in the course of things. But this doesn't seem to be quite how Isaiah thought of God's 'doing'. For the prophet, God's 'activity' isn't the kind of heavy-handed involvement that's just obvious on the surface of things. Rather it must be discerned, perceived, by hearts that are awakened, attuned to the resonance of the deep energy of life. It's our job, our task as God's people, to cultivate our awareness, to become capable of recognising what God is doing – 'now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'

As a community, we know something of what's involved in this work of noticing God's activity. Our choice to leave Holy Covenant, for example, to enter into a cooperative arrangement with the St Ninian's congregation and relocate our worship here. None of this was obvious, a set of divine instructions or blueprint for evolution we were simply given to obey. No – our perception of this new thing was about becoming aware of a movement of energy, feeling our way towards where openings for fuller life, fuller flowering and unfolding might be revealing themselves. It involved listening deeply through our conversations, our dreams, our hesitations, the blocks and unblockings that happened along the way. And now that we're here, this task of discernment, this call to be attuned to what God is doing in, among and through us, continues. And not just for me and Neil, not just for our Benedictus Council, but for all of us.

New things are happening and new things are yet to happen – and we're all needed to pay attention to what they may be. So as we begin here, one of the things I want to encourage is for us to listen for what's arising in coming weeks and months – what dreams are quickening your imagination, what energies in your bodies? What needs of your own or of the wider world do you sense seeking expression, seeking engagement or holding? What yearnings are you present to, and what hopes for

participation, connection? It's by means of such stirrings and leadings that God makes God's activity known, available to be joined. A time of beginning is, like the season of spring, a fecund, burgeoning time; a time of *viriditas* – holy greening. So in this season of newness, let's help each other be responsive to what God is doing, let's wonder and explore.

Which brings me to truth number two. What God does, one way or another, brings life. Sometimes new life comes by a difficult route; sometimes there's a necessary dying, a loss, a period of humiliation or exile. But always, God is in service of life's renewal and increase, life's recreation and replenishment. For ancient Israel, as in our context, the image of water in the midst of barrenness is a powerful metaphor for the nature of God's encounter with what threatens and desiccates life: 'I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert', God promises the prophet. This feels particularly poignant in our drought-stricken land. It speaks also, I think, to the desperate thirst of our culture for access to what Jesus calls 'living water', connections to reality, truth and love, where so much of what's on offer is a wasteland of untruth, image management, competition and anxiety.

A community such as ours, a site such as this, is called to be a point of access to living water, God's peace and truth and love. Being a point of access means tapping into it for our own life, and allowing it to flow through us to others. The previous pope, Benedict XVI, once said that the 'external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast'.<sup>1</sup> We are to be a place of water in the desert, deep water, deep calling to deep. This is a vision we share for this site with the congregation of St Ninian's, and it's what makes this beginning so full of promise. The Preamble to our Memorandum of Understanding with St Ninian's speaks of our sense that 'co-operation between our communities offers rich possibilities for enhancing each community's distinctive identity and activities, as

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<sup>1</sup> *Homily of Benedict XVI*, Mass, Imposition of the Pallium and Conferral of the Fisherman's Ring for the Beginning of the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome, St Peter's Square, 24 April 2005. [https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20050424\\_inizio-pontificato.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050424_inizio-pontificato.html)

well as allowing for a sharing of life that will support more fruitful engagement with the community around us'. And it goes on: 'For both communities, the image of an outback waterhole encompasses many of our hopes and dreams. We desire to become a place of refreshment and replenishment, an open sanctuary in the midst of our city'.

Again, what this will come to look like – what this waterhole will offer more concretely – we don't yet fully know. For our part, we trust it will involve our existing offerings and practices, spaces for silence and stillness, for community, reflection and conversation ... But there is surely more to unfold as we seek to share in what God is doing, giving water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert and drink to God's chosen people.

Which brings us, finally, to truth number three. At the heart of our life, at the heart of our capacity to offer sanctuary and channel living water, is our practise of worship and prayer. To be the people of God is, says Isaiah, to be formed to declare God's praise. Not because God needs God's ego stroked; not because God wants us to be sycophants. But because truly to praise God is itself the sign that we are joined with reality, filled with God's own joy and enjoyment, and so vibrantly peaceful. Praise is just what happens spontaneously, it's what issues forth from us, when we're connected in this way, when we experience God as our dwelling place. Praise the utterly non-utilitarian delight of discovering that God is God, and that, despite everything, goodness reigns.

John Main once wrote that whatever service a Christian community renders to the world, 'there must be a space at its centre where it can simply celebrate its own existence as a godly people – a community rooted and founded in God'. And he went on to say: 'that centre must be a focal point of its justification in existence. And out of that rich and enriching centre will spring all its works and activities. Our main task then, as individuals and as a community is to return to that centre and to return to it continually'.

So here we are, returning to the centre, seeking to perceive and be joined with the ever new, always life-generating activity of God. And as we gather in this place for the first time, we trust that we are where God would have us be in this season; we give thanks for having been led; and we seek the grace to be faithful and fruitful as we're planted here, our roots deeply watered by prayer and our branches stretching out with God's greening life.