

Readings: *Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40*

Text: Luke 2:40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Theme: *Change is integral to life – the old year is ending and the new year is about to begin*

“The only constant in life is, change,” so says 500 BC, Greek philosopher, Heraclitus, who also proposed that fire is the ultimate reality, and all that there is are just the manifestations of fire.

I am not quite sure about the validity of Heraclitus’s view about fire as the stuff of being, but I doubt if anyone can challenge his conclusion about change as a reality of our existence. We see it with our own eyes; it happens all the times because life is, definitely, not static.

All the readings for today reflect on the changes that are happening to the writers or their contexts.

In the reading from Isaiah, the prophet is essentially singing with joy for the wonderful change in fortune that is happening to the people of Judah. They had been humiliated and taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army about fifty years earlier. But in today’s reading, the prophet is rejoicing because of the restoration of Judah after the exiles were released and were allowed to return home.

In 61:10, Isaiah speaks as one released to enjoy the promises of God to restore the people. But his joy is not focused on vindication with the overthrow of their oppressors. Rather, it is the type of joy that naturally springs forth at a wedding or in the new growth of springtime. It is a joy that arises not just in God’s deliverance, but in the bringing forth of righteousness. Not only that the exiles have been delivered, but they have also been changed for good in the process. This joy is based on the prophet’s understanding that God is opposed to injustice.

The release and the return of the exiles are also bringing changes to Jerusalem: it is being restored, and the prophet has pledged a personal commitment to the restored Jerusalem. He will pray and intercede constantly until Jerusalem’s vindication is clear to all who had accused her of being a whore. He ‘will not keep silent’ (62:1).

He is completely absorbed in his intense expectancy, and he will continue to speak until the dawn of the day of salvation (62:1), or the ‘day of the Lord’.

The image of the ‘burning torch’ recalls the ‘light’ and ‘brightness’ of 60:1, associated with the coming of the Lord’s glory. When this brightness arises, the Lord will give Jerusalem a new name; that is another change. According to Jeremiah 33:16, the new name of Jerusalem in the ‘day of the Lord’ is, ‘Yahweh is our vindication’. There follow two indicators of Zion’s royal status in the eyes of God. Isaiah says Jerusalem will be ‘a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord’ and ‘a royal diadem in the hand of [their] God.’

The reading from Luke continues the imagery of light and glory, and the salvation of God. Simeon is, in effect, the new Isaiah who now recognizes in Jesus the coming vindication of Judah. Luke emphasises the light that will shine from Jesus’ coming as an illumination or an enlightenment to the Gentiles. Here, he refers us back to the ‘glory of the Lord’ that shone as the angels delivered the message of Jesus’ birth.

The messages from Isaiah and Luke have some overlapping points. Both refer to the tremendous joy in the coming of the Lord to his people, and both have an ethical note to the event. That is, God’s deliverance of his people issues their new freedom from oppression, as well as a new ethic, a new behaviour and a new way among God’s people. Again, a change in behaviour that is expected.

It also has a universal note. Through the justice and mercy of the people, the God of justice will enlighten the whole world. The world is changing in this seemingly inconsequential event.

So what was prophesied in Isaiah is now being fulfilled in Luke with the birth Jesus. This event is bringing many changes to the lives of people in Judea and in Galilee, but as you can see in the Luke reading, it is bringing changes to the whole world, also.

This is what Paul is writing about in his letter to the church in Galatia. He says, “*But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children*”. This is something new for the gentiles. “*And because you are children,*” Paul continues, “*God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our*

hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God." This is all new for us; this is a beautiful good news.

Closer to home, the birth of Jesus is also bringing changes to the lives of his parents, Joseph and Mary. Many of us are pushing the age that the Samoans called, *sinasina*; meaning, the age of the shining white hair, or the shining bald scalp with no hair, like yours truly. But I am sure you can still recall that heavenly experience of your first child with blinking eyes like those of baby Yoda in the Mandalorian series, not to mention the disrupted sleeps and daily laundries, for there was no disposable nappy, then. Well, Mary and Joseph are going through the same, joyful experience of having their first baby, an experience that is unmatched in life.

Change, as Heraclitus has pointed out, is the stuff of life. It can be beautiful, but it can also be ugly. That is because there are costs as well as benefits. Some like to embrace the benefits, but would balk at paying the costs. As a result, some are averse to change, while others cannot keep still.

For me, I always look at the benefits rather than the costs, so I have lived a life that is always changing, always on the move, and Grace has been very brave to accompany me in my elusive dream. Together, we have travelled and experienced different cultures and ate different foods. And along the way, we were blessed with two lovely daughters. Moreover, my appetite for learning remains undimmed since I left Samoa as a teenager to be educated in the *palagi* ways. And we have not finished. In February next year, I will be beginning a new parish ministry in a foreign land, though only a few minutes from here by car. We are excited and are really looking forward to that new change and new challenge.

What about you? Do you like change? Are you afraid of change?

Sometimes, circumstances can force changes on us, as we have learnt from the pandemic this year. What change did the pandemic force upon you? Did the changes produce something good for you?

For me, staying at home was the big change that I have to make, which was probably the same for everyone. And the good that came out of it, was that for the first time in a very long time, I did not get sick with the flu; it was a wonderful break from the yearly ordeal of stuffy nose and struggling for oxygen.

What kind of change are you hoping for, say, for yourselves, your families, your communities, your club, and for Wesley?

Usually at this time of the year, as the old year ends, while the new year is about to begin, people start making resolutions about things they would like to do in the new year, or set goals that they want to achieve. Have you thought about something different that you want to try next year?

Heraclitus is right; change is the only constant in life. We cannot avoid it. It is what happened on that first Christmas day when it ushered in Jesus as the number one agent of change. He split history in to two epochs; one a period before his birth, and the era in which we still are in, after his birth. Further, those who witnessed him in ministry testified that all of creations came into being through him (Jn.1:3).

In this coming new year, aim to embrace change, because it is at the borders of changes where you will encounter God, because change is integral to life, and God is the God of life.

For the glory of God.

Amen