

Sermon Notes – The Reverend Helen Belcher – January 17, 2010

Section I

“Every five hundred years, the Church cleans out its’ attic and has a giant garage sale”.

These are the words of an Anglican Bishop, Bishop Mark Dyer, from the Episcopal Church USA, who many of you may remember from *Theology Alive*. They are the words that have inspired a new book by Phyllis Tickle entitled *The Great Emergence* in which she explores the great changes that have occurred approximately five hundred years in the history of the church.

Bishop Dyers imagery of the giant garage sale describes those tumultuous, uncomfortable times in human history when the old order is painfully challenged. Times that God uses, powerfully, to bring new ways into being and to bring great healings. These times are never easy. They are full of uncertainty and turmoil as the old order crumbles.

And guess what, we are in the middle of one of these great shifts right now.

It is comforting to know that we are not alone.

When Peter climbed out of the boat to follow Jesus, he had no idea that he was being called upon to preside over the very first Giant Christian Rummage Sale. I think if Jesus had hinted at it, or described the details, Peter would have probably gotten right back into the boat and sailed away.

Jesus gently said, “follow me” and Peter obeyed, little knowing that follow me meant that eventually he would preside over ‘the greatest and most dynamic change a fledging church could face: the transformation from a small but growing sect of Judaism to its’ new identity as a worldwide Gentile church.

Meet Peter at the end of the Gospels:

He never goes into a Gentile house: it is forbidden.

He eats according to Gentile law: he observes the rhythm of the law washing, bathing, and observing the seasons as far as he is able.

He does not eat with Gentiles: it is forbidden.

He does not pray with Gentiles.

He will do business with Gentile. He will be polite and respectful but he will not deliberately touch a Gentile.

However, God has a job for Peter that will birth a more inclusive and more glorious church...and though Peter may personally choose to observe the law of his ancestors, he is forced into a position where he has to acknowledge that other Gentile forms of Christianity are emerging and they are as powerful and as spirit-filled as his Judaic Christian expression.

One day, recorded in Acts 10,
God sends Peter Cornelius, a Roman Centurion. Over night a mold is broken and a new reality begins to take shape.

Section II

For a moment let us leave that threshold in time and jump two thousand years to the time in modern history just before the beginning of our own great re-ordering.

Visit in your imagination, a church in Northern England in the 1890's. It is a beautiful church in stone gothic style with neat graves and a commanding steeple. Inside it is dark because the windows are decorated in elaborate stained glass. Your eyes are drawn to the high altar which is decorated with elaborate hangings with fringes and brocade. On either side there are beautiful candle stands in front of an elaborate carved rail in dark wood. You know which is your pew because the dark wood is beautifully carved with different biblical characters. The Victorians could not imagine that such elaborate beauty would come to an end.

Visit the very same church in 2010. Look towards the altar and see today - yes candles and in between them a very large king sized bed. Recently, a young couple in their thirties purchased a church from the sadly diminished congregation. They have worked hard to restore and renovate the church. It has become a beautiful warm home that honours the old wood and yet has a youthful feeling of hospitality and openness. How sad it is that the parishioners of that church continued in a routine and style that once meant a lot to Victorians but had ceased to speak spiritually to younger people. Just like the words we speak, our physical spaces are a language and if our physical spaces no longer speak a language that is understood by the next generation, then they will cease to be spiritual spaces and will become something else. We don't want that to happen here at this church.

Section III

Fortunately, Peter shows us a pathway when we find ourselves in rummage sale times.

It began that day, recorded in Acts 10, when Peter felt hungry. He had not had lunch and whilst others prepared it, he went up on the roof-top to relax and perhaps pray. As often happens when someone has low blood sugar, Peter dozed off and because he was hungry, he dreamt about food. In his dream the sky opens and a sheet comes down filled with all sorts of animals. A voice says: "Since you are hungry, kill and eat".

Now Peter has very traditional Jewish ways and so he immediately says:
"No, I have never offended the laws of my ancestors and I am not going to begin now".

Important things usually happen to Peter three times and so the voice instructs him to eat two more times and he refuses two more times.

Finally the voice says: “What I have made clean, you must not call unclean”.

Then Peter wakes up, greatly perplexed because he says: “What does all that mean?”

But he has no time to ponder the question, because at that moment the Gentile messengers from Cornelius are banging at the door.

Peter remembers the words of his dream: “What I have made clean, you must not call unclean”. He goes with the messengers, enters a Gentile home, prays with them, lays hands on them and baptizes them, because he can see that the same gifts of the spirit manifest in the Jewish Christian community are also apparent in these Gentiles.

Thank goodness for Peter’s boldness or none of us would be sitting here. The churches in Jerusalem are concerned about tradition, as are many of our churches, because when Peter reports back to them, the very first question that is asked is: “Did you go into their house and eat with them?”

Yet, this was a huge moment in history. It was the first time that the church began to understand that a person did not have to be Jewish first, in order to become Christian. It was the dawning of the realization that it was possible for communities of differing cultural backgrounds and expression to be part of the one church.

Section IV

We live with similar challenges to Peter.

A great re-ordering has begun to take place in our society. It will not stop. Our job is to learn its’ language.

I often feel like I sit right in the middle. I am old enough to have had Victorian grandparents and I have grandchildren who are formed by a radically different world.

My Victorian grandparents lived fairly simple lives. Yes, they had struggles but on the whole they knew what they believed and how to behave. They had no T.V. and their evening entertainment was sitting around the piano and singing or reading. My grandchildren play tennis on the *Wi*, whilst *texting* their friends and listening to their favourite music on head-phones. My Victorian grandparents thought Muslims only lived in Arabia and did not know if they had ever met one. My grandchildren are surrounded by a richness of diversity that no previous generation has experienced. To my grandparents, the word ‘*sup*’ meant to dine. My grandchildren have no idea that this word once was associated with food, they see it as a short for of “*what’s up?*”

My Victorian grandparents liked sacred spaces in which they liked the important things highly decorated. Life then was simple and they were certain about what was important. My grandchildren are constantly bombarded by new ideas and images. They need simple physical spaces so that their brains have room to breathe and where they can connect with

their souls. They need simple, light, uncluttered spaces: spaces connected with their own souls so they can discover a sense of belonging.

The young are as strange, if not stranger to us than the diversity of the Gentiles to Peter. The young are at our door demanding to be nurtured, seeking peace, direction and love.

If we do not offer them the space they need they will go and find it elsewhere and we will be left to dwindle.

Every five hundred years, the Church cleans out its' attic and has a Giant Rummage Sale.

We at St. Peters are pros at rummage sales. We know how to sort, how to let go and how to discover treasure. We are blessed that we know to walk this pathway well. And we need not fear for Jesus is with us and beckons us in the same words he spoke to Peter "*Follow Me!*"

In Jesus name. Amen.