

## Sermon for Advent 1 (Sunday 27th November 2016) - *Mike Fox*

Isaiah 2:1-5

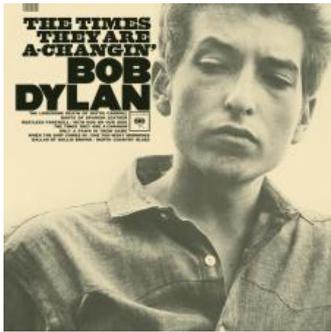
Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

The Future House of God

An Urgent Appeal

The Necessity for Watchfulness

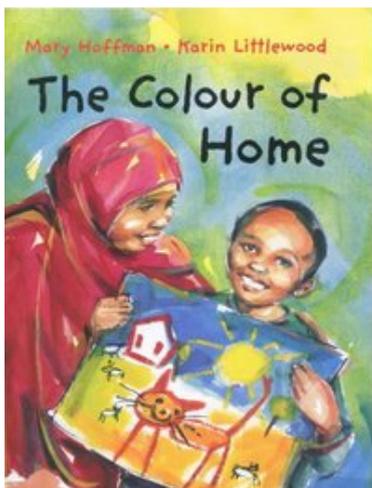


*“The times they are a’changing.”* As we move from one church’s year to the next, perhaps it is appropriate to wish you all a very happy new year! If you’re the type of person who makes resolutions, I wonder what your priority will be over the next year; is it going to be a radical change to your approach to life or are you going to stay steady as you are? Are the changes that will come under your control or not?

It seems to me that the world is changing at a faster and faster pace and it is becoming harder to keep up ... or I am just ageing slightly? It is clear that our political systems in the West are getting a bit beyond many people’s patience. The unexpected result of the UK referendum in June this year highlighted the desperation that the voters felt with the status quo and our politicians. Donald Trump happened to be in Scotland when he heard the result and his immediate reaction was to congratulate us and comment that: *“we had won our country back”*, but that misses the important points that our country must play a responsible part in world affairs and a step change in our relationships isn’t an easy thing to manage. Our first reading today speaks of a time when all the nations will co-operate and we are a long way from that. Now the United States have served notice on their government too and voted for change. Neither country knows quite what change they have voted for and we will all have to wait and see. *“The times they are a’changing.”*

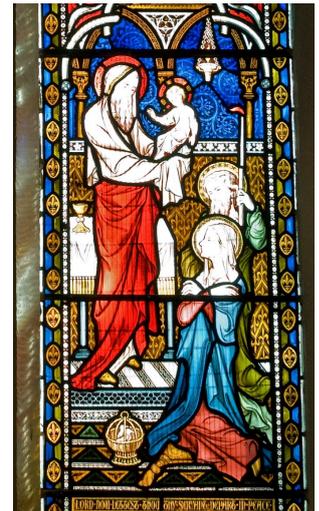


It is possible that we can nudge change in particular directions and it is noticeable that technology is also changing more and more rapidly. Most of us, I guess, will have been asked to sign online petitions that can grow into a force for change; do we feel more in control of our country when we can make our views heard just by pressing a few buttons? Sometimes, I’m sure, there will be one set of buttons being pressed for one ideal and another set for more or less the opposite. What do we think about those in our midst who have no buttons to press; our friendly asylum seekers are at the mercy of whatever regulations are in vogue and the systems put in place to apply them. All they can do is wait for the system to respond, and when it does, their situation often goes through a step change. At the beginning, they get dispersed from one city to another and then they have to start from scratch finding out where facilities and resources are and who their new friends might be; this could happen several times. Even when their claim is accepted and they are granted leave to remain, it is initially only for two and a half years and it may be several months before they can find somewhere else to live – in between, they become homeless. When their claim is turned down, they may become destitute, but it may still be better than what they have fled from – that’s something they don’t like to discuss or dwell on of course, though the system demands that they make their case in full detail as they seek to progress from one status to another. For them it is

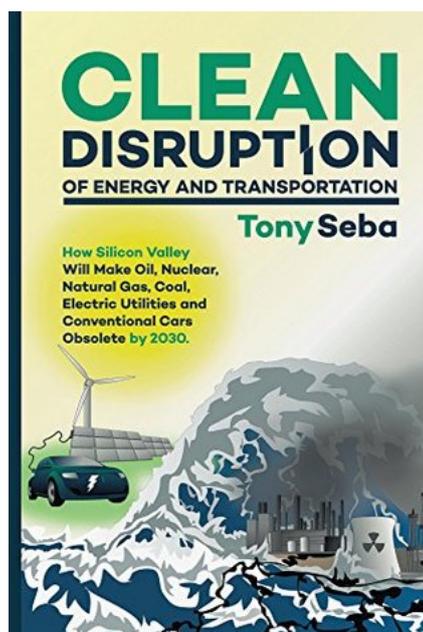


certainly true that: *“the times they are a’changing.”*

So, what do we usually think about as we begin Advent, waiting on and preparing for the coming of Christ into our world. The conventional pattern of themes that we follow during Advent starts with a look back to our spiritual roots and to focus on the patriarchs of our faith. This gives us some stability as we contemplate what has gone before and how our tradition has become established over the ages. The second Sunday gives us an opportunity to revisit the prophets and to think about what is to come. So together the first two Sundays allow us to dwell on the past and hope for the future. As we approach Christmas, we think more specifically about John the Baptist, the forerunner who proclaimed the coming Saviour and then about the Virgin Mary who heard from the angel Gabriel that she had been chosen to bear God’s Messiah, *“a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel”*, as the King James version has it [Luke 2:32]. Many would say that Jesus has had a bigger impact on the world than any other person: He is the one the Jews were waiting for; He is the One who encourages people everywhere to lead a life in obedience to God’s Will. It highlights a step change in the life of the world; *“the times they are a’changing.”*



All our readings today encourage us to think of change. Isaiah speaks of the new Jerusalem and of an age when we can safely beat our swords into pruning hooks – at present we seem intent on arming ourselves to the hilt and spreading this power to areas of conflict in the world to earn wealth and maintain jobs. Paul speaks to the Romans about waking from sleep, to put aside the works of darkness and put on the light of Christ himself – wouldn’t that be a change for good? Matthew looks further ahead to the second coming, suggesting that we will be on one side or the other; we must stay awake and alert to the possibilities of the ultimate change in our lives.



There may be some changes that are a little easier to predict. Tony Seba in his 2014 book *“Clean disruption of energy and transportation”* speaks of improvements in technology that will change the way we live very dramatically ... and, if these improvements could be brought to everyone including regions where there is endless conflict, perhaps we could begin to move towards the world that Isaiah foresees. Let me pick up a few illustrations to indicate the kind of disruption that Seba is talking about. Back in 1903, Scott-Montague, a British MP, said: *“I do not believe the introduction of motor-cars will ever affect the riding of horses”*; Seba has found two photographs of a street in New York at around that time to confute that statement. The first shows the street full of horse-drawn carriages and one car; the second, a mere 13 years later, shows the street full of cars and just one horse. He calls this change a disruption, an unstoppable change that is brought about largely by economics and improvements in

technology. The new technology, in this case the motor car, took over because it became readily available, more reliable and especially cost-effective. A similar disruption you will remember took place when digital cameras came on to the market – however cheap Kodak and Fuji made the film for traditional cameras, they could not compete with the new forms of picture taking which were

essentially free once you had the equipment. No amount of marginal improvements could hold back the tide.

The next large disruption, Seba claims, will be to do with energy and transport. Once we have established efficient methods of generating energy from renewable sources and then storing it in light and compact ways, the path will be clear for electric vehicles to replace our current petrol and diesel equivalents. Seba expects that the only new cars available 10 years from now will be electric ones; last week, as if to confirm that, Jaguar LandRover stated that they expect 40% of their car sales to be electric by 2020 – we’ll be able to breathe clean air again and be another step along our way to combating climate change; *“the times they are a’changing.”*



Enough of material things – where are the disruptions that we can see in the spiritual realm? As we look forward to Christmas, we can consider again the bridge that Jesus came to build between earth and heaven. We remember that he is sent by God to be one with us and he becomes mortal just like us; he is subject to all the taunts, the injustices, the inhumanity that people inflict on one another and he takes it all upon himself. After a very short period of ministry as itinerant healer and teacher, Jesus is tried and put to death on a cross to protect the old ways and prevent the new life that he promised. But the authorities reckoned without the possibility of spiritual disruption – by taking his physical life, that simply provided the opportunity that Jesus needed to overcome death and mortal limitations; by the time he had risen on the third day, it had become clear that his way of life and his focus on God’s will promised much much more. After his Ascension and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the disruption was complete. There was no longer any need to return to the old way of thinking and living; his disciples could all draw on his spirit to guide, to strengthen and to receive life, life that is truly abundant; *“the times really are a’changing.”* Through the new year of the church, we look forward to reliving all of that ...

*... in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN*