

## Leith 9/9/18 – Incarnational v Institutional Church - Kristin Jack

Last week for those of you who were fortunate enough to be here, Brett brought us a tremendous message based on **Isaiah 43** “Remember not the former things, nor consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

And when you get a message in which God is clearly speaking to us, & which is clearly **prophetic**, you don’t want to skip over it, you want to come back to it & look at it some more. And that what we’re going to do today. Now if you remember, one of the things Brett talked about was the decline of the institutional church in the west, & how our census figures in NZ show that we have declined from a time when perhaps 90% of NZers would have identified as Christians through to the 2013 census, in which only 45% of NZers identified themselves as Christians. Of course, that doesn’t mean that, say back in the 1950’s, 90% of NZers *were actually* followers of Jesus – it just meant that 90% identified themselves with this cultural identity known as “Christianity” – but a much, much smaller number would actually have been committed followers of Jesus, and committed to following Jesus’ teachings. And Susan & I experienced the same thing when we lived in Cambodia, where 94% of people would identify themselves as Buddhist, but really it was only a tiny percentage of people who knew what Buddha actually taught & who were actually committed to following those teachings. For most Cambodians, “Buddhism” was just a cultural identity.

But that said, the fact remains that the number of people attending churches in NZ continues to decline, and many churches continue to limp along & eventually close.

And there are many reasons for this, but this morning there are **three** that I want us to look at more closely.

The first one is that of community: In the West, there is I believe, a **desperate search going on to find community** – people are searching for a place where they can find *significance, be accepted, be valued – and have a voice*. But this has become so hard for us, because Western culture is at its heart incredibly individualistic, & therefore so many attempts at building community fail. In our heads we treasure the idea of community, & say we really want it; but in practice, we find it really hard to give up enough of our **individuality** to make it work. And we’ve reached the point now where people have resorted to trying to build **virtual communities on-line**, but of course that can never satisfy the deep need for face to face relationship that’s hard-wired into us.

A second preoccupation I see is a **search for leadership** – genuine leadership that is **courageous**, that is **innovative** and that can help us get to a better place. And this is of course related with the search for community, because **sustainable community does need good leadership** – whether that be shared leadership, or team leadership or

whatever, but community does need leadership. And we can see in the election of someone like Donald **Trump** this desperation to find someone, anyone, who will **transcend the corruption & self-serving policies of the past**. And of course, many people are disappointed because it doesn't seem that corruption & self-serving has been transcended in any sense at all. *And as with community, this is an area where we as the church should be showing the way.* But when outsiders look at the church instead they hear story after story of **sex abuse scandals & big name Christian leaders falling** after having misused their position. One of the big heroes when I was a young Christian was **Paul Yongi Cho**, who ran the biggest church in South Korea, & wrote books about how you could super-charge your prayer life & so on. But Yongi Cho is now in prison in Korea, serving sentences for fraud & tax evasion.

The 3rd dilemma or dynamic facing the West, I see, is **a desperate & confused search for spiritual reality** that is taking people, particularly young people, down all kinds of dark & maze-like corridors, & mostly away from the church. But because, when they look at the church, by & large people *are not seeing purity & integrity in leadership, & they're not seeing a depth of community*, they are looking outside the church for spiritual guidance.

So three crises, both for the world & for the church & all inter-related – **a crisis of community, a crisis of leadership, and a crisis of spirituality**. But one of my favourite sayings, that I often use, is that *'in every crisis there is an opportunity'*. And when you look at these three crises, they each represent incredible opportunities for us as the people of God, for us as followers of Jesus. For the Jesus we follow, and the Scriptures we read, lay out for us models of what genuine & rich community can look like, and lay out for us what genuine Godly leadership with integrity looks like; and of course, in following Jesus & reading the Scriptures we have not just a “spirituality”, but we have the Holy Spirit himself, the Spirit of Jesus, come to live in us and counselling us & teaching & guiding us how to live. It doesn't get better than that.

So today, I want to look at these three dynamics, these three crises **and** I want to look at *the really big question that Brett raised for us*: What is God calling his church to be, that will **witness** to the reality of Jesus in **this** culture at **this** time? In many ways it's the question of what will our new wine skin look like in the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Remember in **Luke 5:37** when Jesus is debating with the Pharisees, and he tells them “*no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins*” – and of course we know from the NT that new wine is an image of the Holy Spirit, and Jesus is telling the Pharisees – who represent **a rigid, law-bound religion**, that their system of rules & regulations can't contain this new life that Jesus is inaugurating – that a new container or structure or wineskin must be found. **And in every age & generation**, for the church, the wine skin has to be renewed and become elastic again, or else it can no longer contain what the Holy Spirit is trying to do.

And I think it's becoming clearer & clearer that **the old, 20 th Century wine skin** that most of our churches are still bound by, has become old & hard & rigid, & is creaking & cracking & splitting, & the our wine is threatening to leak out & evaporate. So what might the new wine skin for this time & this generation look like?

**We'll, before I stick my neck out & say** what I think this new wine skin will look like, let's go back & look at the Scriptures that Cat read to us this morning – because I think there are some major clues here.

In the passage from **Mark**, as Jesus & his followers are walking steadfastly towards Jerusalem for that final Passover & the cross, **two of Jesus' most prominent & oldest disciples** suddenly approach Jesus and seek to secure key places of importance in Christ's coming Kingdom, which they suppose is imminent & about to be established on earth. Now they're humble enough to **let Jesus have the number one place**, but boy they want to make sure they've got #2 & #3 places locked down with their names on them. Now James & John were two of the first disciples called, & along with Peter they are the disciples who seem to be closest to Jesus. And if Jesus' Kingdom is about to come, they figure now's the time to make their career move and secure their professional futures.

And of course, they've already heard Jesus say to Peter **“you are Petros, the rock, & upon this rock I'll build my church”** – so perhaps they feel they need to stake **their** claim now before all the best positions get taken. Jesus then warns them that anyone who wants to take a place of leadership in his movement had better be **prepared to suffer**, & they say yes, we are prepared to suffer, and from there Jesus moves on to **contrast** how **leadership** works **in the world** with how it works **in his Kingdom**. In the world it's all about clamouring for **status & power**, & looking to see who has got the most **clout**, & who's **ruling over who**, & who's got the most authority. But in his **Kingdom**, Jesus says authority & greatness & mana are to be based on **servanthood and humility & character**, rather than on status or money or power.

And it's interesting, that the action that immediately follows in Mark verses 46-52 is that Jesus & the disciples come across a man called **Bartimaeus**, who is blind & who is a beggar – crying out for help from the side of the road – a real opportunity to serve. But instead, just as when parents were bringing children to Jesus to be prayed for earlier in the gospels, the disciples tell Bartimaeus to be quiet & not bother the Master. But Jesus cuts through all of that, and asks Bartimaeus how he can help him, then restores his sight, & Bartimaeus responds by becoming a follower of Jesus. **Jesus is never too busy to spend time with someone of zero status and power or wealth, and to be a servant-leader.**

And our 2 nd passage that Cat read from **Philippians 2:1-11**, written to the church at Philippi, affirms this emphasis on humility, on putting aside selfish ambition, and of seeing other's interests & needs as just as important as our own. The take home message

of this passage is that we are to have **the same attitude as Jesus, the same mind as Jesus, the same character as Jesus.**

**But here is the problem** that the Christian church faces: **2000 years later** & we still have not really heard the rebuke that Jesus gave James & John on the road to Jerusalem. The church across every denomination has been filled with men & women **jockeying for position, for tenure, for job security, for status, & for power.** Down through the centuries we have built palaces & thrones for popes & bishops and dressed those clergy up in robes and jewels. The evangelical version of this is that we have TV evangelists & Pastors who suck millions of dollars out of their flocks while flying around in private jets and living in luxury mansions. **We have built the church of James & John, the church of Zebedee.** Both Protestants and Catholics, we have built hierarchies & layers of professional religious clergy & accumulated power in the hands of a few. All the scandals that have been emerging about **sexual abuse by clergy** or in church run orphanages, whether Protestant or Catholic, all **have one thing in common: Leaders with too much power & too little accountability or too little genuine community.** But it's clear from the gospels that Jesus wants us to build a church, a community in which **Bartimaeus would be welcomed** and embraced and loved and treated as a brother, a community in which every person is treated as a brother or a sister without fancy titles or status or hierarchy.

It seems to me **the old wineskin** was shaped like **a triangle or pyramid** – the shape of a hierarchy. But the new wineskin will be shaped more like **a circle.** And if there was a **symbol** for the old wineskin, it'd be **the altar or the stage,** because that's central to most hierarchal churches. And the symbol for **the new wine skin?** That surely has to be **the table,** for all through the gospels we find story after story of Jesus eating with rich & poor, Pharisee & tax-collector - & at the table all are equal, all are eye to eye.

And this is the kind of community I believe people are thirsting for: a place **where welcome & hospitality is more prominent than status-seeking or power games;** where grace is more important than **legalism;** & where **healing** is more important than **judgement.** The church of Jesus is a place where people should be **able to come just as they are,** without feeling like they've got to wear a mask, put on airs, or 'fake it till they make it', but instead a place where we can be real with one another about our struggles & our vulnerabilities.

The church of Jesus is a place where **we imperfect people** come to help each other learn & grow, learning what it means to love God & love each other, knowing that we'll all make mistakes along the way, but that's Ok, because God's mercies are new every morning & his faithfulness is great. We need to **be brave and try new things, & experiment** with different ways of being community – communities that take us beyond meeting once a week in a church building. And to be honest with you, as I've looked around NZ the best example of authentic Christian community that I've seen is what the **Urban Vision** people are doing up in Wellington, with clusters of young & older people

choosing to relocate to poorer parts of the city to live together, or at least near to each other, and to use their homes as places of welcome & ministry to their neighbours. And the thing that has impressed me most about UV is **their depth of discipleship**, with their young people & with the next generation coming through.

**Now back to leadership:** the New Testament talks a lot about **the character of the Christian leader**, but there is only one style of leadership that Jesus promotes: & that is **the servant-leader**. Not the leader who can shout loudest, but the leader who can wash the feet of everyone else – even those who would betray him & fail him.

But one of our problems, especially in the evangelical & Pentecostal churches, is that we are too often more impressed by charisma than by character in our leaders. Even though Jesus said in Matthew 7:20-23

*By their fruit you will recognise them. <sup>22</sup> Many will say to me on that day, “Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?” <sup>23</sup> Then I will tell them plainly, “I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!”*

The goal then of the Christian life is not that we would do spectacular miracles – I think that’s a **by-product** of doing God’s will – but our **goal** is for our character become more like the **character** of Christ.

**Let me summarise** then, what I believe Jesus is calling his church to be in this day, in this generation:

1. A Community not just a congregation.
2. Led by servant leaders
3. A missional community (incarnational)
4. A servant community
5. A Jesus centred community
6. A Spirit led community

Let me go through each of these at expand a little on what I mean. Now a **congregation** is a group of people who come together once a week, do their worship business, then disperse. **But a community** is a group of people who *do life together*, who’s lives intersect & who have relationship with one another & who **help each other grow**. This is where house groups or life groups are so important, and I know this is an area we haven’t been super-good at promoting, but if you’re not part of a small group somewhere, you do need to get into one if you want to grow personally & in community.

**Secondly leadership** –we’ve already talked about the character of the Christian leader – but I’ll just add this. The key question people ask themselves when sussing out a leader is

this – **“can I trust them?; are they trustworthy”**. And as part of this they look for three C’s – are they **competent**? Do they **care**? And is their **character** up to it? These three things make a leader trustworthy. And here’s the thing – **this church is full of leaders & would-be leaders**. Many of you are leaders in your workplaces, in your fields of study, at home, & of course here at Leith. We don’t just have two or three ministers here at Leith, we have dozens.

**Thirdly** – the most **dynamic communities** are communities that have a sense of mission, a sense that they are **called to a great task**. Brett ended last Sunday’s service by getting us to turn & look outward through those windows, knowing we are called to serve in a world of pain & confusion & violence. And we have Jesus, we have the answer. And again, I know **many of you really are seeking to be Jesus** to those around you in your workplaces & study places. Let’s keep on encouraging one another on in this great call we have on our lives, to be the light of the world. Whatever happens, let’s not be discouraged.

Brett last week used the word **‘incarnational’** to describe the church that was really reaching out into the world. This idea of course comes from what Jesus did in leaving the perfection & the peace of heaven, of the God-head, & becoming a human being like us & among us – **sharing our suffering and our struggles**. And we are called to follow that example, incarnating the gospel into the world around us. We are the only Bible some people will read. But instead we’ve become obsessed with numbers – we’re obsessed with counting ‘bums on seats’, when a far better measure of discipleship is ‘boots on the ground’. We keep measuring & valuing the wrong things.

**Fourthly** – a **servant community**. You know the world is no longer impressed by folks getting up **on step ladders or Christian TV programmes** & shouting at them & telling them what filthy sinners they are. They’ve heard that over & over, & then they’ve watched those same preachers get exposed as having sexual affairs or embezzling from their organisations. But **Jesus said it’s by our love that they will know we are his disciples**. We need to touch the world where people are hurting, & we need to meet real needs in people’s lives if we want to be heard. Even our evangelism needs to be **servant-evangelism**: 1 Peter 2:12 implores us to *“live such good lives among the unbelievers that they will see our good deeds & glorify God”*. A few verses later, Peter implores us to *“to always be ready to give an answer to all who ask you about the hope you have – but always do this with gentleness, respect & a clear conscience”* (1 Peter 3:15-16)

**Fifthly** – I am totally convinced that the church for this generation must be a **Jesus centred community**. Now at first that seems obvious, & of course every church I’ve ever seen claims to be a Jesus-centred church. I mean you never come across a church that has up on its notice board *“we are not a Jesus centred church”*. But a truly Jesus centred church knows this: It knows that the goal of each Xn & the church as a whole is **to**

**become more like Jesus, the study & the practice of the gospels must be central to the life of the church.** Now in my time I've seen churches where it wasn't the gospels but instead arguments over the book of Genesis or the book of Revelation that seemed to be the focus, & I'm glad I'm not part of one those churches.

**Sixthly** – the church of the mid 21<sup>st</sup> century needs to be a **Spirit led community**. And again, nearly every church claims this, but I believe the mark of a Spirit led church is that we **take time to listen to God, & that we take time to listen to one another**. It is very easy as a church to be programme driven, or personality driven, or ego driven, or finance driven, or even doctrine driven – but a Spirit led church is a church full of listeners who are prepared to take courageous & creative risks, so that the gospel comes alive and becomes visible & attractive to the world around us.

So that said, how about we do some listening? How about we just take a minute now to be still, & let God by his still small voice speak to us. What do you think is God saying to us about the new wine skin, about the kind of church he is asking us to be? And if you've got access to pen & paper, or your phone, you might want to jot something down. Take a minute to do that, then we'll take another minute to share anything that has come to mind with the person next to you. It could be something that adds to something I've said this morning, or it might be in total disagreement with what I've said this morning, that's all good. And then after we've done all that, I'll close in prayer.

