

Making room for the Jackals and Ostriches

Isa 43:16 Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
17 who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
18 Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
19 I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
20 The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21 the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise. *Isaiah 43:16-20*

I grew up in a tradition that had no apparent concept of a season called Lent. Neither did we observe Easter at the prescribed time of the year. Rather, we young people went tramping and camping – I'm not even certain that normal worship happened back home during the Easter holiday. We were the Open Brethren - for us Easter was celebrated every Sunday as we gathered around 'The Lord's Table' and took an hour or so as we remembered what Jesus had done, the depth of our debt, and the due of our gratitude. I'm a little embarrassed to admit that Lent continues to remain largely an untested mystery to me. From ashes and pancakes to foot washing, it has largely passed me by.

So, I sit somewhat uncomfortably having been asked for a Lenten reflection.

Of those presented, it was the Isaiah text that moved a little in me. In a season where we are invited to let go, to divest ourselves, to simplify, the text seems to invite us to consider our will to power, to be willing to put it behind us, to 'not remember the former things, or consider the things of old' for the Lord is 'about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do we not perceive it?'

The new thing involves bringing life to arid places, places where the wild, the jackals and ostriches, the despised, the unclean, are celebrated. Here they are honoured by their Creator, and their Creator in turn is honoured by them. For a people that had a very clear understanding about who/what was considered unclean (pretty well anyone who wasn't

one of them) the question arises - has their Lord had a change of mind? Of course not - there are hints like this throughout Scripture that there are other ways of seeing – we're simply catching up with the One who invites us not to consider anyone unclean (Acts 10:28).

We live in an age where the church continues to celebrate power – the power to control the lives of others, the power to decide who is in and out, who is acceptable and who isn't, the clean and the unclean.

The invitation in our church is to see those places where we continue to use our power to discriminate, to alienate, to exclude - to see those places where we push those seeking water and life back into what remains of the wasteland.

In this context I was appalled, a couple of weeks back, to see the actions of the Uniting Methodist Church at their General Conference in St Louis, as they effectively took a step backward in their making room for the LGBTQ community. Yet we are in danger of moving in the same direction. We are a Church which once took the bold step of making room for the Jackals and Ostriches, those for so long considered 'unclean' among us, (and I'm the first to admit that I was part of the opposition at the time). Yet we are becoming increasingly insular in our denial of the One who seeks to draw us all into life together in recognising that everything belongs, and that we are all part of one another and the whole of creation. In this we are called to celebrate our common humanity and the redemption, freedom, wholeness that are ours in Christ. At the same time we recognise the call upon our lives to care for this place where we live as we cooperate with the One who would transform its wasteland places to a places of nourishment where all can all thrive - including the Jackals and Ostriches.