

Change

Acts 11.1-10 / Rev.21.1-6 / John 13.31-35

*How many drummers does it take to change a lightbulb?**One, Two, and a-one two three four*

We might have a few more changing lightbulb moments as we go along this morning. Because a theme that connects all our readings is 'change'. First of all we heard in the reading from Acts how some of the earliest Christians were finding it difficult to change in their attitudes to non-Jews, Peter has to explain how he came to change his mind after a vision he had in Joppa. I don't think so long after the event we can grasp how big an issue change like this was for them. But if they hadn't changed, we probably wouldn't be here this morning.

*How many archaeologists does it take to change a lightbulb?**Three. One to change it and two to argue about how old the old one is.*

Then we heard in the reading from Revelation the image of the New Jerusalem – a vision of the end of time, when things will be totally changed. When we open the papers or watch the news, we are more or less certain to read of deaths, grief, and pain in one form or another. But in that vision, those things it says 'will be no more'. God says to him: 'See, I am making all things new'. This is about change on the largest possible scale. We will hear a wonderful anthem which underlines this later.

*How many civil servants does it take to change the light bulb?**One to change the bulb, and 44 to do the paperwork.*

Then in the Gospel we hear Jesus preparing his friends for his coming death. Those men had a tremendous change to cope with, hadn't they? After a couple of years following Jesus, being with him day and night, hanging on his every word, trying to do what he was asking of them with him watching what they did – suddenly they were going to have to be his disciples without that physical presence. Because he was also preparing them for the Resurrection, when they met with him in a different way, and for his Ascension, which we celebrate on Thursday and next Sunday.

*How many lawyers does it take to change a lightbulb?**How many can you afford?*

Let's bring this back to us today. Both I and this community are facing change. When I was beginning to prepare for this sermon and saw those words 'I am with you only a little longer' prescribed for today's Gospel, I thought God has a sense of humour, as it so applies to me this morning! I promise I didn't choose today as my last service in Ludlow because of the Reading set for this Sunday. But yes, I am about to face big

changes. From Wednesday I will have a new address, if I am lucky a new phone number, a new home, a new local community, new neighbours, and a new church. I will have to leave behind things that have been important parts of my life here. I did my last town tour last week. I won't be taking services or preaching because I can't apply for permission to officiate until I have been part of a new church for six months. I will probably still get an hour on the organ tomorrow, and because I will almost certainly be in the way on Tuesday when the removal men are going in and out, I will have my last session with 'Licensed to Trill' – the recorder group I have enjoyed so much. Now, hopefully I will be able to play the organ in St Ives, and my daughter is already searching for recorder players to introduce me to. But it will be an awful lot of change. Most of the time I am looking forward to it – but not always, because change is demanding in all sorts of ways.

How many Irishmen does it take to change a light bulb?

One to hold the light bulb, and 99 to turn the house round

More importantly, this church community is facing change. For a while there will be a hold on new ventures – the rules say that you can't usually change services and so on during a vacancy. That is sensible, but can also feel frustrating. So some things paradoxically can't change in the short term. But being without a Rector for a while is not all bad news. Vacancies often help church communities to discover new strengths – or rather strengths they didn't know they had. It is a chance for building on what has been achieved in the last chapter of this church's story – and I am sure you will agree that there has been a great deal for which we have to thank God for. This is a much healthier community in some ways than the one I encountered when I came to Ludlow thirteen years ago. When Pippa and I arrived, at the age of sixty five, we found we were about the youngest in the congregation. That certainly wouldn't be true if we were arriving now. The re-ordering of the church, the advent of the coffee shop and major developments like Stephen House are changes that have enriched our life and our mission. The whole atmosphere of the church is different.

But I sincerely hope that over the coming years there will be lots more changes here. That's not because there is something wrong with how things are, but because this a living community. What God wants it to be in five years time and ten years time, we cannot know. But you are the Body of Christ in this place. You are people who must be looking forward – and to quote the hymn writer Fred Kaan - you must always be praying 'for changes make us bold.' You need to ensure that my next lightbulb joke isn't true here.

How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb?

Ten – one to change the bulb, and nine to say how they preferred the old one

St Paul wrote to the Philippians telling them if they are going to get things right in the future, then they need to remember all the good things there have been in the past – 'Keep on doing the things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.' Change doesn't mean forgetting the past – it means learning from it without being bound by it. It takes a great deal of courage to let go of what you know – it is like hanging onto the side of the swimming pool and launching yourself out when you are not quite sure whether you will sink or swim, but on a bigger scale. That hymn of Fred Kaan also

includes these words: ‘May we with the courage take the risk to leave the past behind, to be a people on the move, thrown caution to the wind.’ He wrote it thinking about how Abraham had left the place he and his family knew, and went off to find the unknown Promised Land. But it is also the pattern Jesus set his disciples.

How many psychiatrists does it take to change a lightbulb?

Only one, but the bulb has got to really want to change.

We can deal with change with confidence, because we are loved by a God who is unchanging. In Henry Lyte’s hymn he follows his rather depressing ‘Change and decay in all around I see’ with ‘ O thou who changest not, abide with me.’ We all have to live with the fact that we are heading for the greatest change of all. Back in the day, when I still had a voice, people paid good money to hear me sing words that Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ‘Behold I tell you a mystery, we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.’ In the short term wherever we live or the long term when this life is over, we put ourselves into the hands of God’s unchanging love. King George VI quoted in a Christmas broadcast some words by Minnie Louise Haskins: “And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown’. And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’” Amen. So let it be.