

4 th Mark of a Healthy Church Sermon	St Michael's 9.30am
	Note change of Gospel to John 12: v20-26

Today we turn our attention to mark 4 of the Healthy Churches initiative – it's a process where we are using 7 marks to think about where our church may go in the future. It will help us to decide where we need to concentrate our energies in the months ahead.

So this morning we are looking at the whole idea of change – the fact is that we should not something that we should fear or resist, but embrace – in other words we should face the cost of change and growth.

Now change is something that we face throughout our lives. It is something that can happen naturally. We all experience change. As children, we leave the comfort of our 'family world' and enter the world of school. We grow up and leave school and home; we may marry and have children; we start new jobs, move to new houses or areas... life is full of change.

Some change – we choose. A new job – a job somebody has chosen to do. Or perhaps we choose

to start a family. Even when change is chosen and wanted.... the process of change can be unsettling and stressful. It takes a while to settle into a new job, to become confident and to develop the skills needed. Or a new baby arrives – and however much that baby is wanted – our lives are turned upside down by sleep deprivation and the needs of a tiny person who is completely dependent on us. So even changed that is planned and wanted can be difficult and challenging.

And of course – some change come very much uninvited. Any here who have experienced the changes that come with bereavement or redundancy or ill-health, will be able to tell of the huge stresses that unwanted change can bring; the feelings of loss and pain and grief; the pit-of-the stomach fear; the terrible sense of uncertainty and hopelessness.

Change can be hugely challenging...it can take us places we would rather not go and teach us lessons we would rather not learn.

Indeed there are many jokes about change, for example...now this one I like – but please don't tell David Newlove!.....
'How many Methodists does it take to change a light-bulb?' 'Change!.... surely not'

This is a very ecumenical joke by the way... it works well for URC and Baptists too. Even – if I dare to admit it the Church of England.

So this sign of health is not an easy one. We are not trying to pretend that the process of change is not at times difficult, painful, frightening even. In fact – this sign is about recognising and facing the cost of change... rather than pretending it does not exist. And change in the life of the church is no different from change elsewhere in life. .

The simple fact is that change is a sign of life and growth. A healthy church in this area is prepared to face the cost of change and growth. They are prepared to take carefully considered risks whilst unhealthy churches are ones that fear failure and so dare not act.

But let us be clear, people can misunderstand change – some view change as an organizational change, a change of liturgy, the times of the Sunday service. The truth is that real change is a change of heart.

Real change takes time, it not accomplished in a short period of time, it takes time to grow and develop.

A healthy church faces the cost of change and growth. It requires a willingness to stop and reflect on the value of what we are doing. What are we doing that makes us special? What are the bits we would value and save at all costs?

But it strikes me that the key is that this mark connects closely with seeking to find out what God wants, and doing a few things and doing them well.

Too easily, both personally and as a church, we rush around in a frenzy of busy-ness bearing little fruit.

Loren Mead once wrote “

So if we are listening to God, to what God wants, then we need to have a healthy attitude to change.

So what are the signs of a healthy attitude.

Firstly, we should embrace the past, whilst daring to take on new ways of doing things. And this new way it can be evolutionary or revolutionary, it can be about developing what we currently do, making “church as we know it” work in today’s changed and changing world. Another way is revolutionary, for example starting a new group in a different setting, working out to nourish and express our faith. Just look at the Messy Church Initiative which has started,

which many of you have supported. In a way, the Tinnies celebration that is starting here on the 17th September is exactly that.

And let us not forget, Our calling as Christians and as a church is not to be settled or comfortable or secure. Our calling is to be for others, for the outsider, for those beyond our walls. Living out this calling may well be uncomfortable, risky, difficult and challenging. We should not be expecting to be comfortable... and we should be careful not to let our own needs and preferences dominate any agenda for change or growth.

Secondly, we should be prepared to take risks. Even if things go wrong, as a church when things do not work – that is OK, it is not a negative. The key is that we learn from the experience.

There can be no guarantee of success in this life, so faith often shows itself in a willingness to follow a hunch or conviction.

Thirdly, that we respond creatively to challenges that face the church and community

That we need to be responsive – trees and tall skyscrapers look rigid, but in the wind they bend. We make choices and adapt to changed circumstance. So too do healthy churches – we must listen to where God is calling us to be, be open to work of the spirit. It is sometimes very easy to shut down, to play safe, but we must let the Holy Spirit work through us as we move forward together.

And most importantly, those positive experiences of change, however small, need to be affirmed and built on.

Our reading from John's gospel is a profoundly uncomfortable one: "Listen carefully: unless a grain of wheat is buried in the ground, dead to the world, it is never any more than a single seed. But if it is buried, it reproduces itself many times over. In the same way, anyone who holds on to life just as it is, will destroy that life. But if you let it go, reckless in your love, you'll have it forever, real and eternal. If anyone wants to serve me, then follow me".

Jesus self-giving life is a pattern for our life; and for our church's life. If we cling on to what we are, we will lose what we have. If we are willing to lay down that life, God promises growth and harvest and new life. This pattern, of letting go, of dying, of burial, in

order to find life and growth and resurrection is at the very heart of the Christian story. It has to be at the very heart of our story too. And before we lose sight of it, death and all the painful horrible stuff, is not the end of the story. The story ends with the fulfilling of potential; with something tiny growing into something abundant. It is a story about life and hope and a future.

As a church, as we reflect on our future, looking at possibilities – indeed, in early September, we are having an open meeting to reflect on just this and it is a meeting you are all invited to.

You see the old joke about changing the light bulb is an interesting one – you see, it is about the idea of change, it is about changing to what?

Just nip down to B&Q or Morrisons and look at the sheer range of light bulbs available – all for a particular purpose, be it shape, design, filament, LED, Gas filled, Florescent – the list is endless. Just like the number of daring new ways we might think about being Church whilst still holding onto our traditions. The key is that regardless of the bulb – it emits light, it radiates light out into the world from this place.

Churches on the journey to health are ones that have come up against costly experiences of pain, puzzlement, and change. In them health is evidenced by their willingness and capacity to face uncomfortable truths and real obstacles and keep going – such churches reap the rewards of staying faithful to the costly call to follow Christ.