

...follow don't wallow...

A four week Advent course by Hayley Matthews based on the Advent daily readings in The Bishop of Leeds', Nick Baines, book *Freedom is Coming*.

Week Three

'are you open to hearing new things and moving eventually into a new world or are you more comfortable staying where you are? The new things are not actually new, as the 'story' of God and his people has not changed since the beginning, but to embrace new ways of being – even in old places that are not as they were in the past and must therefore now be new – will involve choice and the taking of responsibility for that choice' (p58, *Freedom is Coming*, Baines).

I wonder if, like me, you've ever sat in a room of people knowing you ought to say something but never quite gathering the courage to say it? As I've grown over the years, I now recognise that sometimes, as a Christian, it is actually my responsibility to speak up and out on behalf of those who have no voices either because they are simply not there to defend themselves, or because a people-group is being denigrated or maligned.

Jesus talks about in discipleship very much in terms of choice and right decision making. Even the Good Samaritan teaches us that being a pious bystander is to fail to meet the needs of our enemies miserably, by God's standards, let alone those in need in our own communities. The excerpt this week really does put us on the spot in terms of our choices at the beginning of the new Church year – will we opt for old comforts, or shall we dare to embrace new ways of being that continue to carry the light of Christ into today's world? It's a stark choice and some might say an obvious one, but it won't make it any easier to make. We may feel we've been backed into a corner by COVID but what if God is leading us into new things? Dare we let go?

For however forward thinking we are most of us wear 20% of our clothes 80% of the time and repeatedly buy the same foods for the same meals week in and week out in spite of our Superstores offering the promise of a different meal every night of the year. We enjoy familiarity and routine; we feel comforted by our traditions, our tried and tested; we know

what we're getting. To choose to take responsibility to do something different or differently is to be a Mary, to say 'yes' to the unexpected knowing full well you're going to get a lot of flak - and possibly even be ostracised - for it. To be prepared to patiently weather a storm of controversy as those most afraid of change cling tightly to traditions that often are no older than those holding them.

The importance of this message though, is that there is nothing new under the sun – God has one message and that message sustains and challenges us all into sharing it afresh in every generation in ways that everyone in that generation can hear, in language they can understand through words, and music and actions that are culturally relevant, accessible, open, welcoming, beckoning them home. It may even refresh us and our faith to hear the beloved words we have known for so long in new ways; may open our eyes to facets of God that we have never before encountered; may deepen and enrich our faith as we seek to share with others the newness of life promised to all.

Reflection and discussion

1. Which tradition (contemporary or not) feels like 'home' to you at church?
2. Could you imagine that taking place in any other way?
3. Given a choice, what would you change about your church's traditions?
4. How do you think people beyond the church relate to what happens in our services?
5. What might the 'new world' of worship/discipleship look like now that COVID has changed the way we live?

Prayer

Loving God,
With You as our heavenly Mother and Father
It is often tempting to abdicate all responsibility
To Your sovereign power forgetting
That You have called us to be Your Body
Your voice
That Your kingdom may come here on earth
As it is in heaven.
Give us the courage and wisdom
To be open to Your ways, old and new
For the sake of those who do not yet know Your love
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.