

St George's Anglican Church, Epsom

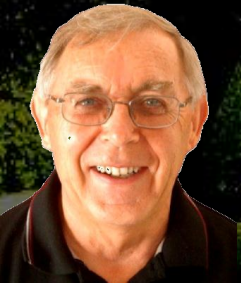
1st January 2012

Preacher: **Rev George Stonehouse** (*Priest in Charge*)

Theme: **"See, I am doing a new thing!"**

Readings: **Isaiah 43:1-4, 18-19 • Luke 2:25-35**

Verse: **See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland. Isaiah 43:19 (NIV)**



SERMON

"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?" Isaiah 43:18

Today is the first day of another year, and as we look at a fresh beginning, so I trust you are looking forward with anticipation to what God, through the Holy Spirit, is going to be doing in your personal life, and in the life of the Body of Christ here at St Georges. I trust that you do not want to live in the past. I trust that you can forgive those who may have hurt you, or misunderstood you, or in some way misrepresented your intentions, and I trust that you have been able accept forgiveness where you have been at fault. The Queen referred to forgiveness in her Christmas message.

"Although we are capable of great acts of kindness, history teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves - from our recklessness or our greed. God sent into the world a unique person - neither a philosopher nor a general, important though they are, but a Saviour, with the power to forgive. Forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith. It can heal broken families, it can restore friendships and it can reconcile divided communities. It is in forgiveness that we feel the power of God's love." From the Queen's Christmas Message 2011

So it is time to move on and face the challenges ahead. In Isaiah 43 we read God's instructions to the Israelites. We see His call not dwell in the past, but to see the new thing He was doing. He asked if they perceived it. That question is just as relevant today. "Do we see what God is doing? Do we perceive the new things springing up?" That question leads to a more basic question, "Do we really want to see what God is doing." and "Are we willing to join Him in what He is doing?"

We have come through some difficult and confusing times in the last couple of years, now it's time to move on as was made clear at last year's consultation meetings. This year we can anticipate the appointment of a new vicar, and while we wait, we have the opportunity to "get our house in order", to recommit ourselves to God, to repent of a spirit of independence that I believe still lingers over this church, and to seek more of the on-going

empowering of the Holy Spirit. Then, I believe we will have the joy of seeing the Body of Christ being built up, and the Kingdom of God being extended in Epsom.

The Apostle Paul has the key to the way we do this: **Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12:1-2**

The problem as I see it, is that we are increasingly being expected to conform to the pattern of this world, or as J B Phillips writes *"being squeezed into the world's mould."* It is worth taking time to reflect on just how much all of us are being squeezed into the ways of the world.

You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see the downward trends in society.

You don't have to be a great economist to see that as a nation, or as individuals, if we spend more than we earn we end up in greater debt and therefore become beholden to others.

You don't have to be a great theologian to predict what will happen as churches put aside the authority of the scriptures in order to pursue their own philosophies.

It never ceases to amaze me that so many people think that they can ignore the things God has taught us through the scriptures and allow themselves to slide into the world's mould. For example, imagine working for an organization that has these statistics for its

635 employees.

29 have been accused of spouse abuse

7 have been arrested for fraud

9 have been accused of writing bad cheques

17 have directly or indirectly bankrupted at least 2 businesses

3 have done time for assault

71 cannot get a credit card due to bad credit

14 have been arrested on drug-related charges

8 have been arrested for shoplifting

21 are currently defendants in lawsuits

84 have been arrested for drink driving in the last year. The organization is the British House of Commons which makes the law for the citizens of Britain, including laws that discriminate against Christians.

It seems that the Queen was right when she said *"History teaches us that we sometimes need saving from ourselves - from our recklessness."*

We seem to be oblivious of the slippery slope we are heading down. Here both church and the nation are sliding down a slippery slope away from the things of God, and the slope is getting steeper, and we are in danger of hurtling faster and faster towards a great abyss.

So let's for a moment look at where all this started. It began with a God-given clarity of right and wrong.

Clarity of right and wrong. God gave the scriptures to make it clear to us what is right and what is wrong. He also made clear what truth is. He established non-negotiable absolutes, but in our society there are those who choose to ignore God's Word. They say that there is no truth. Some dare to say God is a delusion.

A blurring of right and wrong. As a result we begin the downward slide experiencing a blurring of what is right and what is wrong. Truth becomes irrelevant, absolutes are banned, and everything becomes relative and personal. Some political leaders say that religion should be a private matter, and that religious people should not get involved in the things of the state, some have had the audacity to advocate interfaith worship.

Toleration of wrong. As people slide down this slope with increasing speed, tolerance becomes a diversionary catch-cry, but it is a one-sided tolerance. People don't have to tolerate us, but we must tolerate them, and tolerate their advocacy of abortion, same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and other moral and ethical issues that are inconsistent with the Word of God.

Acceptance of wrong. The slippery slope gets steeper and tolerance of what was considered wrong, gives way to acceptance of wrong and even the condoning of wrong. Many otherwise alert people become confused and ignore and ridicule those who question their indulgence in wrong.

Indulgence in wrong. If you can't beat them, you may as well join them becomes a prevailing attitude. People are so far down the slope that they have no desire to go back to the top. It all seems too hard to turn the clock back. Things are moving at such a speed that they don't have time to think clearly as they indulge in what is wrong.

A legal right to do wrong. It's at that point that those with their own agendas quickly introduce legislation to legitimize what was once wrong. They do this in such a way that the cry of opposition is ignored, and we are told that we have to get used to the changes in the law. We have seen this happen more and more often in this nation.

Addiction to what is wrong. Then comes the most terrifying part of the slide, people become addicted to what is wrong that they are blinded to the reality of the situation they have created.

This all seems pretty gloomy outlook for the year ahead, and we must ask, "Where God is in all of this?" Is there any hope for the future? Of course there is! We only have to go back to

Paul's letter and continue the rest of the passage from his letter to the Christians in Rome who were also experiencing these things:

“--- but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—His good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Romans 12:2

To survive in this world as followers of Jesus we need the on-going transformation of our minds by the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Then we are enabled to commit ourselves to pursuing the plans that God has for us, and we will not capitulate to worldly agendas. Listen to what God said through the prophet Jeremiah.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. "Jer 29:11

Keep in mind this does not mean that God simply wants to make us rich and prosperous with material things. He is saying that He will not abandon us but will care for us. Now these promises were spoken to the Israelites when taken captive by the Babylonians. They were in desperate straits, and it was of their own making. They had chosen to ignore God and worship the pagan gods of those around them. They gave away their distinctiveness as “the people of God” to become like the other nations, and in doing so became vulnerable and powerless.

The situation of the Israelites in those days sounds all too familiar doesn't it? Today we see many parallel things happening in the church in this nation. Many churches in trying to be like the world around us have in fact become captives of that world and its worldliness. Many have compromised the Gospel in order to become acceptable to a pagan and confused world and so have lost their distinctiveness.

Peter in his first letter, puts all this into perspective. **Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 1 Pet 2:11-12**

Jesus said: **"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." Mat 5:14** If we hide the light of Christ, we leave the world in darkness, and we then live in that same darkness. This must not happen.

Praise God that all is not lost or hopeless. God is faithful. We don't have to go down the slippery slope to be taken captive by worldliness. We don't have to be anxious about the future. Listen to God speaking to the Israelites through Isaiah after they were taken captive. **Isaiah. Isa 43:1 But now, this is what the LORD says-- He who created you, O Jacob, He**

who formed you, O Israel: "Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine."

Fear not. You might well say that's all very well but there are things that do worry me and cause me anxiety, but listen to what God is saying.

"Fear not, for I have redeemed you. The picture here is that of a master paying off our debts and freeing us and watching over us. This is what Jesus has done for us.

"I have summoned you by name." This shows us how well God knows us. In Isa 49:16 God says, **"See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; --"**

"--you are mine." What more comforting words could we ever wish to hear? God is showing us that He will never forget us.

We have this assurance that God knows us by name. But knowing someone does not guarantee that we care for them, but God in His wisdom gives us the assurance that He does care for us. Listen to what He said at the beginning of Isaiah 43: **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.**

Do you hear what God is saying here? We would no doubt love Him to say, "You will have no more problems, no trials, no financial worries, no threats from other people, no sicknesses, no fears, only a life of ease, blessing and prosperity." But that sort of life is reserved for heaven. So while we wait for the return of Jesus we live in an incomplete and flawed world with other sinners.

Note carefully the promises that God gives us while we wait for Jesus.

- **When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;**
- **when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.**
- **When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.**

God has not said that that we will have no more problems. That would be totally impossible while we live amongst other sinners and unbelievers in a world that has sold its soul. What he does say is that He will be with us. And the proof of that lies in the fact that God sent Jesus to come on earth and live with us and experience the same pressures, trials, temptations, and opposition that we experience. Jesus identified with us in the most realistic and believable way possible – He became one of us as a baby, and experienced what we experience. What more could we ask of Him? The key to this empowering of God is not to live in the past as so many people do, allowing past hurts, failures, disappointments, unforgiveness, and sin to keep them in bondage; but to be set free by the sacrifice of Jesus.

So as we begin a new year let's agree to live in the present with a sure and certain hope for the future.

Remember what God spoke through Isaiah.

Isa 43:18-19 "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the desert and streams in the wasteland.

Remember the best is yet to come. The year ahead will have its trials, but far greater, will be the victories we can have in Christ.

PRAYER OF RE-COMMITMENT

Heavenly Father, at the beginning of this New Year, I re-commit my life to you through Jesus Christ, and ask for a fresh empowering of your Holy Spirit.

It is my desire to honour you, worship you, and serve you.

Give me a greater passion for Jesus,

Help me the develop a greater hunger for your word,

Free me from things that prevent others seeing Jesus in my life.

Refresh the gifts you have given me so that I might help build up the Body of Christ,

Give me a desire to see your kingdom grow.

I ask all this in the name of Jesus. Amen



Empowering people to be Christ's followers in the world...