

Sermon for All Saints' Highgate, Sunday, 3 April 2022

God's New Thing (Isaiah 43:16-21)

Thus says the Lord, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

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.

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, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.”

Those of you who've listened to me preach over recent months will have heard me speak about the importance of All Saints' exploring our church's vocation – what God is calling our little community to, in this place, on the edge of Highgate. This morning, I want to take inspiration from Isaiah's words to the chosen people of Israel. I'm going to look forward, and offer one vision of what the future might look like for All Saints. It's entirely speculation on my part. For, I've no gifts of foresight, as far as I know. But I hope that it'll prompt you to develop your own sense of vision for the future, to contribute to the wider discernment within this church. Then I'll conclude by sharing my own sense of the new thing that God is doing among us.

First, imagine that you go home today, and through the mysterious purposes of God, you wake up tomorrow, and discover that the date is now 3rd April 2030. Yes, 2030. It's exactly 8 years from today. Whether this is because you've borrowed a Tardis, or been magicked into the future through some other means, I leave to your imagination. But you wake up tomorrow, and, hey presto, it's 3rd April 2030. The day is a Wednesday. (Yes, I checked.) But despite being a Wednesday, you can't resist the temptation to come along to All Saints'. And as you walk into Church Road, you notice that there's a pop-up café on the side of the church building, with people being served coffee, and a few others sat around tables outside, with quiet chatter buzzing. And around the outskirts, some lovely flowerbeds with spring flowers. Because it's a perfect morning. The sun is shining, the blossom is out, and the birds are chirping.

You come round the corner, into Talbot Road. And as you pass through the gate to enter the church building, you notice there's a little children's playground on the right-hand side of the church building, with some little kiddies squealing in delight. You also notice that the church door is different: it's now made of glass. This means you can see straight into the building. Opening the door, you enter the space – and as you do so, your phone connects to the church's Wi-Fi. Which means you've been here before, and picked up the code. But today it all seems startlingly fresh and new.

Next thing, you notice that the old pews have gone. That's not such a surprise, because you know that was planned for 2022, eight years ago. Instead the space has a group of tables and chairs in one corner, near where the font is. Seated at the chairs are some individuals on their laptops, some heads down, others chatting. As you move up the nave, towards the choir stalls, you look up, and are amazed to discover that the East Window is radically different: it's filled with blazing colours – new stained glass, set out in an abstract form. It makes your spirit leap with joy, gazing at it.

You go over to the noticeboard, and discover some pictures of the worshipping congregations. There are individual pictures of the vicar, who you don't recognise, and also a bunch of lay people who occupy various leadership roles. Some of these look really familiar; others are definitely new to you. And, surprisingly young.

On a table beneath the notice board, you pick up an information leaflet. This tells you that All Saints' is part of a combined parish with St Michael's Highgate. There's a single PCC. And there's only one vicar for the parish, whose image shows an older white woman. However, there's also a curate, a younger black woman. The leaflet tells you that the curate has pastoral responsibility for All Saints. You're surprised to learn there are now two worship services at All Saints on a Sunday. One at 9:30am, and another at 11:00am. The 9:30 is billed as a Sung Eucharist. The 11 o'clock is called a Contemporary Worship service. In addition, there's a monthly Taizé service on the first Sunday of the month, in the evening.

At this point, someone asks you, 'Are you joining us for Tots – our carers' and toddlers' music time?' You notice that someone's set out mats in a circle on the floor, and another person is bringing some baskets of musical instruments. This doesn't quite appeal, so you take it as your cue to head home again. But not without resolving to return on Sunday morning.

Therefore, four days, later, bright and early on Sunday, you're here again, back at All Saints' Church. The outdoor café is still running, and there's a few more people sat around the outdoor tables than on Wednesday. You realise that someone must be employed to work there, because the café's staying open all day. You head in to get yourself seated before 9:30. As you enter the glass doorway, your phone again connects to the WiFi. 'Better switch my device to silent,' you remind yourself.

The next surprise is that the choir aren't in the choir stalls, but are sitting in some tailored pews, up to the left of the nave. For the congregation, there are fresh, modern-looking pews, with padded seats, arranged in a semi-circular pattern around the space. It feels really comfortable, and intimate; especially with the choir so close.

Somehow, you were expecting a bigger congregation, but there's still a good 40 people or so. The Eucharistic service that follows feels familiar. But the whole thing is

being broadcast via some fancy camera equipment, and there's someone at a digital control desk, monitoring the digital feed. You understand that the service is being live-streamed to Hill Homes' Trees, which provides housing for older people. And you learn that a bunch of people around north London and beyond are also tuning in.

Overall, it's less formal than you remember All Saints' of old. However, the choir are a joy to listen to – and their numbers have swelled a bit, with some rich voices added to the mix. The curate's sermon is challenging. But it leaves you feeling that you'd like to get more involved in what the church is contributing to the community.

At the notices, you discover there's a wide range of different activities going on in the church building throughout the week, and hardly a time when the building's not in use. Some activities are run by church people. Others are obviously run by local partners. There's a food pantry, which local people help to run. This offers affordable food shopping for those struggling to make ends meet. You already know about Tots, the carers' and toddlers' musical morning on Wednesdays. There's a children's choir on Thursday evenings. And a teenagers' drama group on Friday evenings that's run by folks from Jackson's Lane Community Centre. There's a dementia-friendly café on Tuesday mornings, run in conjunction with a local GP practice; and two lay people in the church have trained as Anna Chaplains, ministering to older folk. The list goes on.

Once the service is over, you find yourself drawn into conversation with several people new to you. Plus you're served some scrumptious, freshly-brewed coffee. The whole experience leaves your heart warmed and your soul singing.

Then you say to yourself: 'Should I stay for the Contemporary Worship service?' You're not sure it's going to be your thing. But you're encouraged by what you've found so far, and intrigued about. Turns out this second congregation isn't that large, maybe around 30 people, with a surprising gap: not many in their 20s or early 30s. The service is led by a lay person, and proves to be rather free-form. There are contemporary worship songs, and chants from the Taizé and Iona Communities; the prayers are interactive, with diverse voices participating; there's a short talk, followed by discussion in small groups, then feedback. It reminds you somewhat of the monthly all-age services from early 2022. You're not sure it's your thing, but you sense a real energy and commitment from the people who're there. They seem to be loving it.

You don't hang around after the service, but decide you need to head home. That evening, you go to bed buzzing, pondering on all you've experienced. But the next morning, you awake. You look at your phone: it's Monday, 4th April 2022. You're back where you started, in true Groundhog Day fashion. You ask yourself: 'Was it all a dream?'

Let's return to our Biblical text. When Isaiah was speaking to the people of God of his day, he was doing so at a critical juncture in history. They were on the cusp of returning from exile in Babylon. God was on the verge of shifting them back to Jerusalem. Hence, the Lord says, 'I'm about to do a new thing; it's springing up from the ground; can't you see it?' And part of what Isaiah was reminding them, is that this is how God works: their God chooses particular ripe moments in time to rearrange the tectonic plates, as it were. The big shift for them, that they continually look back to, was their deliverance from the grip of Egypt, the imperial power ten centuries before; and, to their escape through the waters of the Red Sea, into the promised land beyond. They remember the Exodus. But Isaiah's also saying, 'Don't get hung up on that one. Don't just keep dwelling on what God did many centuries ago. Because the ground is shifting beneath our feet today. Something new is happening – and it's happening *now*.' That new thing was their return to the Holy Land, back to their capital city, Jerusalem.

And of course what Isaiah senses, is that God's building up to an even bigger new thing. The coming among us in human form, as a little infant. The giving of the Beloved Son, as an adult, to absorb all our sin and violence and the very worst that we could throw at God. And to die an excruciating death for the salvation of all humanity and all creation. That was the new thing that was springing forth. Isaiah perceived it, even if his contemporaries couldn't.

I wonder if we're at such a juncture in history today. The Covid-19 pandemic has been a seismic global shock and disruption over the last two years. It's going to impact us for decades to come. One small example: it's shown us that God is doing a new thing in the church in England, with hybrid offerings: that is, both in-person interaction, like this morning, along with simultaneous online participation; and broadcasts after the event — such as people will experience who'll watch a later recording of this sermon. Such hybrid offerings are here to stay. But to do them justice in this church building will require a dedicated internet connection, a modern router, and an effective Wi-Fi service, along with suitable camera equipment. And those things are only likely to come as part of a wider renewal programme, once the funds to make that happen are available, flowing from a shared vision of a future that's bigger than All Saints' past.

The war in Ukraine is another more recent global seismic shock, especially for those of us in Europe. As Europeans, we all thought that the Second World War was the end of major violent conflict and warfare in our neighbourhood. How wrong we've been proved. How complacent we've been.

This new war in Europe is leading to a fundamental shift. Take our energy supply. The war in Ukraine will act as a massive spur to develop alternative, low-carbon sources of energy. Wind, wave and solar power developments will accelerate.

Because of global warming, we know that we *should* be making this shift anyway. But now we've got an even more compelling incentive. The incentive of ensuring that Western Europe isn't dependent on the Russian Federation for future energy supplies. And of avoiding providing the Russian government with the money to invest in massive military weaponry.

As one little example, I think this'll mean that churches like ours will be asking: 'Can we put solar panels on our church roof? Can we play a part in supplying people in our local neighbourhood with some of their electrical energy?'

Whether you've been part of All Saints for decades, or whether you're still getting to know this little community of people, I wonder if you believe that God is doing a new thing here. You might think that the Exodus from Egypt was big, and even puzzle whether the parting of the Red Sea could've happened. You may wonder whether God could take human form in the infant Jesus; and whether the adult Jesus could really take all the sin of the world upon himself. But there's something even more surprising for you to hear today. Whether you're six years old or sixty. Whether your thirty-nine years old, or ninety. Whether your name is Andy or Zahrya. Whether it's Faith or Rihanna, Brian or Michael, Anya or Austen.

And this may just knock you sideways. Maybe, just maybe, the new thing that God is doing is – you. You, and your contribution to this gathered people, this church. You, and your part in this parish, and this church's engagement with our neighbours. If anything even remotely like my own vision of the future is to be realised, then the new thing that God's doing, is you. If it wasn't all a dream, it'll be because you helped to make it happen. And were part of declaring God's ensuing praise, in this place. Afresh. And forever.

Amen.