

Ch... Ch... Ch... Changes

Prayer and Reflection:

Let us join now in a time of prayer and reflection upon life's changes and transitions.

May the divine spirit of life and love be with us now in this our time of worship and bless our togetherness. May our hearts be softened and our busy minds be stilled, may our bodies be at peace within themselves as we turn our thoughts and prayers to our world community. Throughout history, the story of our planet has been a story of change, a great unrolling narrative with its multitudinous characters and settings. To be alive is to move and to move is to change.

May our thoughts be with the places in our world where changes are enforced and bitter, where life is tough and there can be little illusion of control for the people who live there; let us think too of the many places where change is held back, repressed, where the search for freedom is seen as rebellion, where free speech is denied, the places where people do not dare sometimes even to be themselves. May all such places be touched by love and understanding, may fear diminish and peace expand.

In our own hearts and minds may we also be filled with peace and love, so we are better able to accept the changes in our own lives, challenging and painful though some of them are. In the midst of our transitions may we be granted all the strength that we need and may that strength be something we pass on to others who we meet along the way, for it is perhaps in our common humanity and in the sharing of our paths in life that we find the meaning and purpose that sustain us and guide us, now and always. Amen

Reading:

This reading is taken from Alan Watts book entitled *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Uncertainty*. Alan Watts was a highly regarded writer on the philosophy and psychology of religion and was as one of the key figures in bringing the wisdom of Zen Buddhism to western minds.

“Perhaps the most exasperating thing about nature and the universe, about you and me, is that it will never ‘stay put’. Yet the perishability and changefulness is part and parcel of its liveliness and loveliness. This is why poets are so often at their best when speaking of change, of the “transitoriness of human life”. For poets have seen the truth that life, change, movement and rhythm are of the essence of all things lovable. In sculpture, architecture, and painting the finished form stands still, but even so the eye finds pleasure in the form only when it contains a certain lack of symmetry, when frozen in stone as it may be, it looks as if it were in the midst of motion.

Is it not, then, a strange inconsistency and an unnatural paradox that ‘I’ resists change in ‘me’ and in the surrounding universe? For change is not merely a force of destruction. Every form is really a pattern of movement, and every living thing is like the river, which, if it did not flow out, would never have been able to flow in.”

Address:

They do say that no-one likes change except for a wet baby. I don't know about you but for me it's a bit more complicated than that. Change is fine with me, so long as I have chosen it – it is the changes that I haven't chosen and that life seemingly thrusts upon me, - those are the changes that I don't like and which, given half a chance, I shall resist. And as I look around our congregation here today at Essex Church I know how many people have had changes thrust upon them recently; in fact I would be surprised if there was a single person here with us today who has not faced some changes in the last twelve months – some of them joyous, some of them scary, some of them seemingly now completed, some changes still very much in transition, in progress, unfinished, incomplete.

And of course incompleteness is the stuff of life – as soon as we are born we are on a journey through life, a journey that rolls and unfolds before us, a journey with unexpected twists and turns. A journey in which we get to make many choices, where we exercise our free will, a journey in which we are, for some of the time at least, conscious and aware. We humans have the

ability to reflect on our existences and it is that I think that gives our lives both richness and poignancy. We are aware of time passing, we watch ourselves change and grow both physically and emotionally. We're born, we die, - and we know it.

The changes in our own lives are mirrored by the universe itself, with its myriad processes, all working to their own timescale – the spinning planets, the burning sun, mysterious black holes, leaves on the trees, roses blooming, birds hatching, - each with its own path to follow, its own sequence of changes. Nothing stays the same be it at the planetary level or at the microscopic. G. K. Chesterton put it well I think when he wrote: “All conservatism is based upon the idea that if you leave things alone you leave them as they are. But you do not. If you leave a thing alone you leave it to a torrent of change.”

And a torrent of change is what we exist in. Alvin Toffler wrote a book about this where he defined the term ‘future shock’ as “... the shattering stress and disorientation that we induce in individuals by subjecting them to too much change in too short a time.” and “the dizzying disorientation brought on by the premature arrival of the future.”

I wonder if any of you have tried to buy a piece of electrical equipment recently – a television perhaps or something to play music on? Buying a TV used to involve a decision about how big a screen you wanted to buy and you had perhaps half a dozen choices. Standing in the midst of John Lewis’ electrical department the other day it dawned on me that we are indeed at the start of a new age – this is the era of ‘home entertainment’ in which every aspect has been made as complex and as varied as possible. And TVs and sound systems are just one tiny example of the complexity of our lives today and as Alvin Toffler predicted when he wrote his book *Future Shock* over 30 years ago now – the effect on human beings facing too much change too quickly is shock and that shock has to be worked through, processed if you like, be it a change of TV or a far more profound change in our personal lives.

The need to work through change has always been known to the wise. I remember many years ago studying the work of an anthropologist called Van Gennep. He coined the term ‘rites of passage’ to describe the ceremonies that tribal people used to mark a person’s transitions through life – birth, coming of age, marriage and death. Van Gennep studied many pre-industrial societies and identified three key elements in any rite of passage. Firstly there is an acknowledgement of an ending. This must be properly marked in some ritualistic way – perhaps through grieving or through some symbolic letting go. The person under-going the rite of passage is then considered to be in a second phase, a time of transition, they are about to cross over a threshold – to leave the past behind and to step out into the unknown. This is sometimes described as a liminal state, a threshold, that border between what is unconscious and conscious, like the shoreline of the sea; this is a place of uncertainty, it is dis-orientating by its very nature because the psyche is in the process of re-orientating itself, finding its way through the fog. I was thinking about this address the other day whilst waiting for a tube and realised that I was staring at a poster for Anthony Gormley’s new exhibition at the Hayward Gallery. The poster showed one of the key pieces of the exhibition – it’s a huge glass room filled with fog, called *Blind Light*. People I’ve spoken to who have been in that glass room say that it’s remarkably scary in there, quite dis-orientating. One critic said of it “I finally found the door to get out by feeling my way cautiously around the wall, I was mightily relieved to get out. So what did I do next? I went straight back in there of course. These are not merely unusual sensations, they are exceptionally vivid physical reawakenings that make you extra aware of yourself. Talk about being plucked out of the everyday.” (Waldemar Januszczak in the *Sunday Times*)

And plucked out of the everyday is a good description of what it is like to be in the middle phase of a rite of passage or indeed most changes in life. It can be exciting and exhilarating but also scary. It’s a time when we cannot know anything for sure, everything is there to be re-examined, re-considered, old routines fall by the wayside, uncertainty rules. And that liminal phase eventually leads on to the stage of transition itself in which the change is made and the new situation is recognised and marked. In an ancient initiation ceremony for example, held to mark a young person’s acceptance into the adult group – the middle phase might well involve a period of isolation and hardship, a time when the young person is tested in some way. Only when the tests have been undergone can the transition to adult status be properly marked by the group. As I thought about changes and transitions this week, one realisation stood out for me. As a society we lack I think clear ways to mark our transitions. And the transitions that are noted the least are the private ones, the quite profound inner developments that we go through at various stages of life, the quiet letting go, coming to terms with, these inner changes need marking and honouring I believe.

There are some key spiritual teachings that are designed to help us through life’s changes and transitions - we’ve heard them a hundred times before and I for one will need to hear them a hundred times more.

The first message is that struggle may contain something of value

The second is to savour the moment

The third is my favourite – this too shall pass.

If we pack up our rucksack for life’s journey with these three teachings, then we are as well equipped as we can ever be for the uncertain journey that is life itself.