

England is a small country, but it is one characterised by immense regional variation. If our vast capital city is in reality a conglomeration of an immense number of tiny villages rather than a homogenous whole, then so much more the country as a whole. Move into the next village and people talk a bit peculiar: move twenty miles away the accents change completely: move a hundred miles and the inhabitants become virtually incomprehensible, as anyone who has had to negotiate the subtleties of rhyming slang can attest. Cheeses are hard and strong in one valley, soft and crumbly the next, ripe, blue and mouldy in the next.

So too more with more abstract things, what is prized in life, what is feared. Indifference is most definitely what London town fears the most: 'boring' is a word that will bring any London gathering crashing round the organisers ears, 'boring' will end a party, close a show, kill a career. The inhabitants of Yorkshire on the other hand go to bed at night thanking God they are plain-living northern folk and pray that nothing they will ever do or say will deserve that most cutting of Northern put-downs, 'a bit fancy that'. The North and at various points on the Thames are the limits of my lived experience of England, but I have eyes to see and ears to hear, and it's clear to me that the word guaranteed to send the denizens of this country into a cold sweat, the term to strike horror into all English minds is not 'boring', it is not 'fancy' it is 'change'.

This is not the fruit of my own personal experience of trying to change churches. Not at, St Mary's- not yet. It takes me a while to get into my stride. But it doesn't take much investigation to reach that conclusion. The *Sutton Guardian* I nervously peruse every week is choc full of laments for our borough, the heart of which is being ripped out, the soul of which being irretrievably lost, week in, week out reliable as clockwork. Of course it might just be a particular editor with a particular agenda, but all the other newspapers of this country, from the muddy coast out East to the hills of the north, from the mucky white cliffs to the London metropolis, all reflect pretty much the same thing: No change please, we're English! Turn back the clocks to before this happened, before everything changed!

For a great many of those who pop through the portals of God's house each Sunday one of the great attractions of the Church is that she represents stability, she represents certainty, she represents continuity. For some it can be the unmovable certainties of scripture, for others it is the sense of timelessness associated with the ancient rituals and practices of the church which stretch back in unbroken succession to Jesus himself, for some it is the visibly aged bricks, the worn pews that attest to cen-

turies of prayer. As the Letter to the Hebrews says, Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. Little wonder that those looking for certainty in an increasingly unstable world cling to the immovable impassible Rock of Ages.

And yet, irony of ironies, the last thing 'the same yesterday, today and tomorrow' means is 'nothing changes'. Christianity is change.

A minor publishing phenomenon of recent years has been the sudden and unexpectedly successful sales of autobiographies of Chinese women. There are now many but *Wild Swans* by Jung Chang was the pioneer publication and perhaps the best known. They usually tell a similar tale, and the horrifying heart of most of these books is the writers' experiences of life in China during the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution was a period of enormous instability in the People's Republic, based as it was on Chairman Mao's belief that the spirit and energy of the Chinese revolution should not be allowed to ossify or stagnate but China should have 'perpetual revolution', should be constantly changing. That was the public pronouncement: the reality was Mao's paranoia that if the people stopped long enough to think they'd see right through the monster at the top. State policy dictated that the Chinese must live *their* most feared thing: to 'live in interesting times'. Well Christian brothers and sisters, these interesting times are the times we should expect to live in.

Which, for anyone who's spent more than 5 minutes in a church must seem rather odd. Church congregations after all are notoriously averse to change. At the last PCC at St Mary's we were discussing some next steps for the parish, and I found myself musing out loud that there is no point asking people what they want the church to go because the answer will be: 'we want it to be like it used to be.' No change please! I was a little tired at the time, but there is more than a grain of truth in such cynicism, which, to skip back of couple of sentences, is rather odd.

Consider the very earliest days of the church, right after the resurrection. Think back to those Easter stories: the empty tomb, Mary meeting the gardener, the upper room, the road to Emmaus: nobody is quite sure what is going on, but the excitement is palpable. The sense that something major has happened, the sense that this is a complete rewriting of the rules, is clear. For those disciples 2000 ago *everything* had changed. On that change, our church was built. This vast towering edifice of faith is built on moving foundations.

The resurrection of Jesus was a seismic shift: not only had the rules of the game changed, the game has changed, the pitch has changed, the players, everything. And

until that time when Christ comes again in his glory there will be no certainties *but that* Christ and his gospel. Everything is in the process of being remade, remoulded, reformed into the new creation, the new heaven and earth, into the resurrection life.

“See” Jesus says “I make all things new”

Into a world based on power, based on oppression, on exploitation, upon dog eat dog and rat racing rat, grab all you can and then grab more; into this world the new life burst. And everything changed. From that moment of the first Easter morning, nothing, but nothing will ever be the same again.

And so it is when the Risen Lord enters our own lives. Cherished certainties evaporate. Favourite comforts disappear. Riches rust in our hands and the clothes rot in the wardrobe. We must expect the unexpected and there is no going back. Even if nothing very much spectacular happens in our lives, they are different now than they were, we are now in the world but not of the world, we are pioneers of the Kingdom of God, and however quiet and retiring we are, that simple fact will always be a destabilising influence. To be Christian is to be used to living on the edge, to be in constant flux, to accept that the old certainties never really were and never will be again. It is to place our lives wholly in the strong hands of the carpenter of Nazareth.

The Romans who persecuted Christians because they thought Christianity was a threat to their Empire were right. The reasoning was wrong but the conclusion was right. Christianity was a threat to the Roman empire, it is a threat to all empires, it is a fizzing catalyst for change in all human structures and societies where the Word of God is not recognised; where love is not the only yardstick of success; where Christ is still left hungry, thirsty, naked, ostracised, untreated, unburied and imprisoned. True, destruction and demolition are change but so are maturation and transformation, evolution and resurrection.

So let us pray that in the year ahead we will live in interesting times. They will be God's times: expect nothing less.