

Facing the strange

‘Ch-ch-ch-changes, Turn and face the strange.’

Change is nothing new, ever-present, and often faster than many of us find comfortable. Whether of our own choice or not, change is often accompanied by some unsettling companions such as waiting and uncertainty. Added to which we can also find ourselves dealing with the transition from one set of circumstances to another. Change, even when it’s exciting and energising, can be unsettling and affect our sense of inner stability. As David Bowie’s song ‘Changes’ says, we find ourselves having to ‘Turn and face the strange.’¹

Whether it’s at work, home, church, or elsewhere, we can often feel resistant to change. Keeping things the same helps us feel safe – especially in a world that changes so much. In times of change, we’re often keen to hold on to that which remains the same. We need stability. When something threatens our stability, such as change or uncertainty, as experienced by so many of us during the Coronavirus pandemic, for example, life feels unstable, life feels strange.

You may like to think about how your life has changed in the last 5, 10, 20 years, and how it might change in the next 5, 10, 20. Perhaps you are facing change at this precise moment?

Many people find change difficult.

It may be a relatively minor one to routine or the process by which a particular task is done – or even just getting a new smartphone! Larger scale changes can also be hard – whether it’s a change of manager or minister; a change in family life at home; or in health due to accident or diagnosis - and also, sometimes, the adjustments involved when recovering from an illness.

At the core of why we find change difficult is partly down to the fact that while many aspects of the world around us can change quickly, we as human beings tend to change much more slowly.

It's rather like a pair of cog wheels that can't interlock properly – one is going at a different speed than the other. This 'mismatch' is often due to the fact that the core characteristics of who we are as individuals can take years to develop. It takes time to change.

The space between

Change often happens when something starts or stops – or one thing stops and another starts in its place. One job ends and another begins – or doesn't. Or we move from one home to another. Whether change takes place overnight or over a longer period, it can be the *transition* that takes time.

Transition is the internal adjustment to change and is intimately connected with the sense of who we are and where we belong during times of change.² We may be able to plan and organise the practical aspects of change but managing the process of transition is often more difficult.

Even with the most positive and exciting changes – such as the birth of a child, getting married, beginning a new job, or becoming a Christian – it is common for people to experience periods of depression, stress, feelings of loss for what they have moved on from, or to have relationship problems in the processing of such change and transition. As someone put it, "The ending and the beginning again are reminiscent of dying and re-birth. In a new situation, we are different. Our points of reference have changed."³

Mark Bradford wrote 'As much as we may wish for seasons of certainty, in which the ground beneath our feet is firm and unmoving, the truth is that such times are surprisingly rare. More often than not, we find ourselves living through seasons of transition, disruption, even crisis. In these times, an old

reality has come to an end, yet a new pattern has not yet presented itself and we find ourselves living in the void in the middle.’⁴ Mark Bradford describes this void as ‘the space between’ and argues that we can spend a lot of our lives living in such spaces: and they are not always the most comfortable.

In times of change, and for that matter in times when change isn’t taking place, it is natural to worry about what it is we are waiting for or waiting to happen or not happen, and to worry about the possible consequences. The ‘What ifs’...

We might still recognise God’s presence in such times and trust God in them – but such is the nature of waiting and transition that our anxieties mean we can easily lose sight of the one who loves us more than we can ever imagine.

Such anxieties are not signs of failure or that our faith or trust are lacking. God understands our feelings and our difficulties. These times of transition, waiting and uncertainty are all part of human experience and it’s natural to want to run away from them at times. We find it hard to face the strange.

The times they are a-changin’

In many ways, Bob Dylan’s famous song sums up the last few decades and my guess is he may not have anticipated just how much the times would change since he wrote it way back in 1963.⁵

We live in a world where there have been massive changes in those last sixty years not least global economic and political change and the awareness of climate change. And then in much more recent times, there was the Coronavirus pandemic – what a lot of change that brought about. Add to that, times of global uncertainty brought about by events such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and in Europe, the increased price of energy and the cost of living crisis. And then the death of Queen Elizabeth II – such a figure of stability in a changing world.

The way we communicate has changed with social media, e-mail, the internet, and smartphones often replacing talking face to face. We can watch our favourite TV programmes and follow breaking news at times and on devices to completely suit ourselves.

There have been changes in families and relationships such as the increased number of blended families. Changes in social mobility and adult children still at or returning to live at home often for economic or other reasons. Changes in the nature of marriage, same-sex partnerships and cohabitation. The world is also a very different place in relation to attitudes towards gender, identity and sexuality. There's been a massive growth of virtual (internet) relationships and people who have no offline (in other words, no face-to-face) friends.

For many, gone is the job for life, 9-5, Monday-Friday working pattern. Many workplaces have a long-hours culture and are target-driven, unstable, highly pressured environments. An increasing number of people do most of their work at home (not just because of the pandemic – that workplace change was happening before all that), bringing with it not just freedom but also isolation from colleagues. For many, the 24/7 culture has displaced the value that Sundays used to have.

There have been major medical advances and improved awareness of mental ill health in particular. People are living longer and that has brought not only increased care demands but also higher levels of activity in older people and positive changes in attitudes towards retirement and death. And, of course, what we all understood as 'normal life' changed dramatically and disturbingly as a result of the pandemic.

Churches are changing – at last, you might say! During the pandemic lockdowns, the arrival of online services reached out to so many and Google searches for 'prayer' were at a height. Alongside struggling churches, particularly in rural areas, there has been the growth of church plants and fresh

expressions, such as Messy Church, within which we see the church engaging with people where they are – although the (sometimes unrealistic) desire for them to ‘come to church’ remains as strong as ever. Alongside that, we live in a multi-faith community and differing interpretations of the word ‘spirituality’.

Whether it’s a change of place (although having moved 22 times in my life, it does get a bit wearing); a change of job status (I moved on from paid employment in 2018 – I thoroughly enjoyed my job but am also enjoying this next stage of life); or a change in being the person we are (something I’ve actively cultivated at several points), change is a constant factor in the lives of many people. Some changes may not affect you personally – but others may be at the forefront of your mind at this very moment.

Stormy weather

This book aims to explore how change affects us and the different ways in which we can find stability in such times: stability based on the unchanging nature of God.

The Bible contains hundreds of examples of change. From being a baby in the bulrushes to a murderer to a leader of people, Moses experienced change. We can think of Sarah and Abraham having a child at their great age – life was certainly never the same again there. David was transformed from a humble shepherd to a powerful and somewhat flawed king.

While the lives of the disciples were changed beyond recognition when Jesus called them to follow him, in other ways their lives remained the same. Some were called from the daily rhythms of fishing in Lake Galilee to an extraordinary experience of being with Jesus. Yet their work and home life also continued and we can see the impact of that change upon them. For example, the brothers James and John were still working for their father, Zebedee, a well-to-do businessman. Is their, at times, impetuous behaviour and

outlandish requests to sit in heaven at the Lord's side symptomatic of the difficulty of their time of transition? After all, we can all be more irritable and irrational in times of change...

Throughout this book, we will consider examples from the Bible, especially from Jesus' own life and experience. In particular, we're going to reflect on how the event of Jesus calming the storm on Lake Galilee can help us. First, we'll consider how the storm itself symbolises times of change, transition and uncertainty. Secondly, we'll think about the impact it had on the disciples and how that reflects our own reaction to 'stormy weather'. And finally, we'll look at how the calming influence of Christ helps us to find stability – and some very practical ways you might like to consider in your own life.

Three of the four gospels record this particular event and each account is fairly similar. That may be because Mark (4:35-41) wrote his account first and the writers of both Matthew's (8:23-27) and Luke's (8:22-25) Gospels may well have drawn on his writing as well as other sources. This event is one of nine 'nature miracles' by Jesus. Jesus performed miracles in response to people's faith; to back up his teaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God through him and his works; out of compassion for others; and, as was the case on this occasion, to instill faith in him where none or little was present.⁶ The miracle forced the disciples to ask themselves, and each other, 'Who then is this?' (Mark 4:41a). That is a question we will also ask.

Also included is wisdom from other writers and personal contributions from a number of ordinary, everyday people who tell their own stories of finding stability in times of change (or not).

We will also think about the value of day to day activities alongside paying intentional attention to God to help find that sometimes elusive thing called stability.

One of the threads running through this book is drawn from Benedictine spirituality. I'm a lay member of a Benedictine monastic community (an Oblate) so that approach influences some aspects of how I encounter Christ in today's ever-changing world. You may like to read *Life with St Benedict* which offers daily reflections on the Rule of St Benedict and how it relates to 21st Century living.⁷

The Benedictine monastic tradition is based on three approaches – listening to God, conversion of life (or change) and stability. We live in a world where change is often feared, stability can be elusive and busyness interferes with listening to God. As we listen to God, we become increasingly aware that in order to change, stability is needed; and in order to be stable, we are also to change.⁸

Before moving on to the next chapter, you may like to take some time to think about:

- Which changes in your life have you handled well?
- What did you learn from those times of change?
- Are you one who 'turns to face the strange' – or keeps facing in the same direction?
- It may be that you're experiencing change, transition, uncertainty or waiting at the moment. What do you need to do to help manage all that is bringing about?