

Surrender

Fiona M Gardiner 5 May 2024, Retiral Sermon

*Lord, our Lord, teach us, lead us, change us
as we live together in the flow of your love.
Amen.*

Today's Psalm begins:

Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things. Psalm 98: 1

New things. Today I want to talk to you about old things and new things, and how our God continues to upend us, overturn expectations and surprise us with joy.

You all know the old joke: *How do you make God laugh? Tell him your plans!*

How often we think we have our lives mapped out, our ambitions and hopes firmly set, only to find that God has different ideas.

Peter found the same in today's passage from Acts.

Here's a thumbnail sketch of what's been happening that leads into today's reading.

Stephen has been martyred, and Saul was standing by, approving before embarking on a terrifying campaign to suppress this new Jesus centered faith.

God has other plans, and Jesus meets Saul on the road to Damascus: Saul/Paul is converted! Let's not skate over the humungous surprise that must have been to the fledgling church.

Peter now travels around the country, talking about Jesus, healing in his name and has recently taken up residence in Joppa, at the home of Simon and Dorcas after an amazing miracle. Simon is a tanner, ritually unclean to all Jews, yet Peter feels able to set aside his prejudices to stay there. Then Peter has a vision, and learns that he has to set aside even more of his prejudices, as the Lord wants him to take the Good News of Jesus to the Gentiles.

I love Peter. He's so transparent. In his vision he says to God's plan, *'Surely not, Lord!'* Acts 10:14

And not just once: three times! (Sound familiar? This is Peter. Peter of the three denials; the three instructions to 'Feed my lambs/feed my sheep!')

The Lord is adamant: Cornelius and his friends from Caesarea are already at the door, and next day Peter sets off to bring the good news of Jesus to a Gentile audience. Good old Peter! See how he's changed?

Now the Holy Spirit is poured out on them as they worshipped and believed. Peter is astounded but challenges anyone to try to stop what God has ordained and the new Spirit filled Christians are baptized into the Jesus' family. The church has broken out into the wider world.

Who would have thought it?

Who could have foreseen that Saul would meet the one he was persecuting with such righteous ferocity and that his life would certainly never be the same again?

Who could have guessed that Peter...big, bumbling fisherman Peter...would be so tender, pliant and willing to have his prejudices overturned? Praise God!

Oh, sing a new song to the Lord, for he has done marvellous things!

Today, Jen, Shane and John will be confirmed by Bishop Rachel in St Luke's. As we pray for them, we know, don't we that God will surprise them in their lives following Jesus. It will not all be plain sailing...it never is. But that's all part of the adventure of following our Jesus, our Lord, Master, Friend. We will follow their unfolding stories with expectation, excitement and prayerful love. After all, there's no escaping Jesus command to us to love one another with the same self-sacrificing love with which he loves us. It's going to be amazing, living with these three new family members!

Oh, sing a new song to the Lord, for he will continue to do marvellous things!

As I was thinking about this sermon, the words from a song and the words from a poem were constantly rumbling around in my mind.

The first is the chorus from a Dave Bilborough song:

I surrender, I surrender, I surrender all to you.

Surrender.

I think that was the word that I was subconsciously associating with this part of Peter's story. He surrendered to the Lord his will, his prejudices, his plans...and see what happened? The church grows again as people come to faith having heard the good news of God's love and forgiveness through Jesus.

Surrender, then, is laying aside the things that, in God's plan for us, we need to be freed from.

How do I make God laugh? I tell him my plans, or even say no to His plans. Surely we would never do that? Surely I have never done that?

When Royston first asked me 25 years ago if I had ever considered becoming a Reader, I was instant in my response. NO!!! Good grief, I had been brought up in the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, had been elder in my Church in Glasgow, had struggled with the strange, alien world Altar when I was used to Communion Table and don't get me started on Liturgy! Be a Lay Minister in the CofE? No way.

No way?

I didn't just say no three times...I kept saying 'no' until I could take it no longer, because it seemed that everyone was challenging me. A storm of suggestions and questions surrounded me, hounded me. Of course, it was really God Himself, calling me inescapably and so I surrendered. I literally said aloud (yelled, actually!), 'All right, God!' and suddenly knew peace.

And so a new adventure began for me: applications, vetting, training, licensing, ministry. It's beenamazing and wonderful and joyous. (By the way, I now LOVE our liturgy and am bereft in a service without it! God laughs again!)

Surrender...in song.

I surrender, I surrender, I surrender all to you.

Surrender **all**?

Well, I know I have more to surrender, and part of that is to realise that it's now time to retire from licensed ministry. It's very strange: I feel like dancing, but my heart is breaking too, because it's been such an amazing adventure.

Over the past three decades you have taken me to your hearts and loved me as I've worked alongside you. But I need to move aside, make way for others, free up my diary for precious family time and embark on a new adventure with the Lord. This faith journeying doesn't stop because I stop wearing funny robes! It's just different.

And important.

All our ministries are important, wherever we sit or stand in Church on a Sunday! We are all Christ's followers, all Easter people, singing the Lord's song, shaping the kingdom, bringing justice and joy to family, friends, neighbours and colleagues. We're like a jigsaw, fitting together, no one part more vital than another. I'm looking forward to what God is going to ask me to do next. Watch this space and journey with me!

Finally to the poem that's been rattling around in my head for days now. Written by Adrian Plass *It Is Finished* is about how the job of building the kingdom is now entrusted to each of Jesus' followers and that the mission will keep on going on until the Lord comes back to claim his own.

*Lord, You said on the Cross
It is finished; it is finished
Finished? I don't think so
Not until the funny little woman on the Friday bus
Means more to me than I do to myself
Not until I read aright the message
Of your pain filled eyes
That I must take the ones You loved and left behind
To live with me as my responsibility.
Not until I place my stock of cherished certainties
Like sad surrendered weapons at Your injured feet
Not until the public and the private faces
Of my troubled Christianity can meet
And know they recognised each other when they met.
Not until I know the names of more than
Half the people in my street.
Finished?
No, I don't think so.
Not yet.*

My prayer today for myself is this, and perhaps you'd like to make it your own as well is number 249 in our hymn books: *Take my life and let it be...*¹

Let's say it quietly together.

Take my life and let it be
consecrated, Lord, to thee.
Take my moments and my days;
let them flow in endless praise.

2 Take my hands and let them move
at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet and let them be
swift and beautiful for thee.

¹ Frances Ridley Havergal (1836 – 1879)

3 Take my voice and let me sing
always, only, for my King.
Take my lips and let them be
filled with messages from thee.

4 Take my silver and my gold;
not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect and use
every power as thou shalt choose.

5 Take my will and make it thine;
it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart it is thine own;
it shall be thy royal throne.

6 Take my love; my Lord, I pour
at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be
ever, only, all for thee. Amen.

Oh, sing a new song to the Lord, for he will continue to do marvellous things!

Poem It Is Finished by Adrian Slade, from the album Shipwrecks and Islands © The Little Music Room/Integrity Music Europe Ltd copied under Church Copyright Licence number 191688.