

Malvern Mashal 27

Responding to Change (iv)

We know that there is unprecedented change going on around us at the moment, and many of us are going through change in one form or another, so I thought it would be good to think about and pray about how what happens in times of change and how we can respond.

We will touch on

- changes that are forced upon us (that is unexpected changes that are foisted on us and sudden Crises)
- coping with the feeling that nothing is ever going to change in certain circumstances (that is slow change, or no change)
- times when we desperately desire something to change
- and when we are seeking to implement change in an institutional sense

Please note the following is a joke and not a denominational statement: “How many Baptists does it take to change a light bulb?” **Change?**

Let’s frame this talk with these wonderful words from Paul as Eugene Peterson glosses them:

Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life.' (The Message, Phil. 4:4-6)

Well we ought to be good at handling change in our country with our changeable weather, people in nations such as Saudi Arabia actually miss the changing seasons very much. You get tired of saying ‘It’s a lovely sunny day isn’t it’ after the first 365 such days!

God delights to turn seemingly hopeless situations around. It’s great to see some person family, business or church that had been struggling restored to a more solid footing.

Do you remember those early Skoda cars quarter of a century ago? They weren’t exactly Trabant, but they were the butt of many jokes - you know the sort of thing: What do you call a Skoda with twin exhausts? A wheelbarrow. Why does a Skoda have a heater on the rear windscreen? To warm your hands as you push it along. And so on. But then VW came along and took them over and things improved out of all recognition. They placed advertisements along the lines of 'We've changed the car – will you change your mind?'

Real change had happened – the challenge was to help people catch up with it. It’s easy to time warp people as well as things, and to remember them in the state they were in ten fifteen years ago. May the Lord give us grace firstly to perceive the difference – and then to trust it.

Few sports illustrate the possibility of change better than the quintessential English national sport: cricket, I was staying with a couple this weeks, and they had German visitors; I was telling them that we are in a state of national euphoria having won the cricket series against Australia. But my British friends folded their arms and looked glum. Nothing could have excited them less. What

a relief we are all different! That Ashes series has already been dubbed the ‘pendulum’ Test series because the fortunes swung now strongly now this way and now that.

Earlier this summer I attended a Test Match between the English and Australian women’s team at Worcester. Entry was free and on the first morning Australia were quickly reduced to dire straits at 28 for the loss of five wickets. It looked as though they would be all out for a staggeringly low total. A few short but remarkable hours later the two Australian batters had turned the game round and reached 250 without losing a further wicket – an extraordinary achievement. It’s what makes cricket such a fascinating game.

Anyway, the sight of the Australian women snatching a rescue from the jaws of seeming certain defeat is a picture of what a determined and anointed group can achieve in their work together on behalf of a wider cause.

Our first need is to remain flexible and open to the Lord’s leading. Computers aren’t the only things that need regularly updating! Sadly, some people are so wedded to the status quo, the way they have always done things, that they refuse to embrace *necessary* changes. Many chapels in North Wales felt offended at the idea of introducing an English language service – but God had sent them English people if only they had been able to receive from them. They preferred to close in their faithfulness rather than to accept that God had sent *English* people along to help them.

Here’s a hint when everything outwardly is being changed: try and keep your home life running as smoothly as possible. It’s much more challenging when everything is being changed inwardly and outwardly all the same time on all fronts.

Too many changes can leave us feeling disconcerted and redundant - well, I no longer fit then/am no longer wanted; and we pull back feeling hurt and ignored. Or are we more flexible than that – more like healthy wine skins and realise that although one areas of service may have gone, the Lord will surely open up another?

We really do have a measure of choice in how we react – and that, of course, will affect how we cope.

Some changes, of course, are introduced and imposed wholesale, and there’s nothing that we can do to avoid them – for instance when governments introduce new legislation

But in our own lives the Lord tailors the scale of change to match our character and our circumstances.

Rays from His ways and leaves Him out. The Lord laments through Jeremiah: “Why do you go about changing your ways?” (Jer. 2:36) meaning why do you forget about the Lord who has done so much for us. We have done everything we can as a society to exclude Him from our national life.

Many of the changes that come about in our society comes as the result of the subliminal power of advertising. The continual drip drip of their message reinforces the consumerist ideal: happiness – well it used to be cigar called Hamlet, or a bigger television: it is whatever the advertisers choose to say that it is. - and we can fall for this. We need a godly filter in our spirits so that we are open to being led by the Spirit rather than driven by the advertiser’s desires.

Jesus gives us clear warnings:

Take heed, and keep yourselves from all covetousness: (Luke 12:15:

Take heed to yourselves Luke 17:3) (in the context of not putting stumbling blocks in people’s way)

Take heed that ye be not led astray ☺ (Luke 21:8. He uses the same phrase again in verse 34)

Take heed how you hear (Luke 8:18).

One thing we can learn from the advertisers is that they do not expect to get their message across the first time round. They are rather like the EU when it comes to referendums – they just keep going until they get the “right” result! If people respond first time round to their wares, that’s a bonus so far as they are concerned. They work on the principle that it is the seventh time that you see and hear something that it really goes into your subconscious. It’s actually not that different in spiritual terms. Not that many people respond to the gospel the first time they hear it, but rather after numerous exposures to it. So don’t be put off by initial lack of success.

Advertisers work on the drip drip of constant exposure. In a sense that is a key to implementing bigger changes – it is rarely wise to go for the jugular and try to change everything at once. Bringing a vision to people’s attention briefly but regularly is important, and then introducing it in bite sized pieces, allowing time and support for consolidation.

There’s never any need to try to go at the pace of the slowest, for instance in the life of any church or business: you provide support and attention for those who are finding the changes hard to cope with - but you work to bring about the long term vision the Lord has given you in accordance both the vision itself, and with his timing to implement it.

Don’t fall for the enemy’s lies: that’s not the right, vision; you aren’t the proper people to implement it, and anyway it's the wrong time to be thinking of doing it!

At the same time, the enemy piles in to try to make you believe that nothing will ever change, particularly in our own lives, or with those who never seem to change – parents, children, bosses and so on.

The next stage always looks impossible, but God can help us to enter into it. What you couldn't do last year, you quite possibly can do this year, or will be able to do next year.

When Ros was a student she found it incredibly hard to witness for the Lord, she was tongue tied when it came to sharing spiritual things. It was a real effort, but she persevered, and as a result people understood why she was such a lovely person, and people began to hear about God through her.

Or you think, how can anyone speak in another tongue without doing the GCSE in that language or going to language school God just gives you a prayer language like, that? Wow! When our daughter was first in Tanzania someone started speaking in tongues when she prayed for them - and it was English the Lord gave that person. It had a huge impact on all who were present. (God was speaking about purity)

Or you wonder how you could ever receive a message from the Lord and pass it on, or how you could be used to pray for the sick or whatever.

Stick around people who are being used by the Lord in these dimensions and the chances are that you will find yourselves doing it too.

You never know what you may become in Him. The Lord makes the difficult do-able and the impossible achievable. Who could have thought of Nicky Cruz the drug dealing tearaway o New York streets becoming a greatly used evangelist of God?

Pray for grace too when the situation goes into reverse, and you are NOT physically able to do this year things you were able to do last year. I have written at length about that and many others forms of loss, in Vale of Tears.

Remember what I said in a previous talk about the value of getting people to pray with you for situations where you are too emotionally bound up to be objective? It's what I call The Heineken principle. "The prayers of others can reach the parts our own can not." They can pray for our ongoing situations with more faith and less emotional baggage – and we can do the same for them.

Our job is to make the framework and step out – how much God comes is up to Him, but we have to be the ones to step out. That's how you find out which areas the Lord regularly uses you in, and it often starts by deliberately "making contact" with the Lord by saying, "Let's pray about this . . ."

Whatever the change that is being introduced, we will respond to it much better if we trust the person who is leading it. Change is much more disconcerting if we are given little guidance – or confidence from the leader who is instigating change. Take a really mundane example. You are on a train and there is a huge delay. It really helps if the driver switches on his speaker and tells you what is going on rather than leaving you in the dark. The Lord normally finds ways to communicate things to us, but when it comes to leadership within a church or an organisation it helps to have the vision set out clearly so we know what is going on.

There is good evidence that change is instituted much better when vision is owned by as many people as possible. This comes about by good communication, and for people to feel that they have played a part. I know that when one person I know wanted to institute some rules for Internet access for his employees at work, he considered making a list of what was acceptable, but decided that he should call the office staff together and get them to write them instead. The result was that he got all he wanted - and everyone was happy because it had been decided by majority decision without having to lay down the law.

Many books have been written about the theory of change management. I have been following Ros's odyssey in bringing change to various parts of the maternity services in England, Wales and Scotland for many years. Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that really sound ideas often come unstuck because of the lack of interest and commitment on the shop floor – people's fears and stubbornness; their preferring the status quo we spoke of earlier. I can't go into detail here, but Rogers' theory of change management is worth being aware of: he speaks about pioneers and then the early or late adopters, and then about the procrastinators, not to mention the out and out saboteurs.

Praise God for the early adopters – the pioneers. Great – I identify with them! They are the prophets in our terms – and prophets are always the "eyes" of the body of Christ who sense and see opportunities that others do not. The drivers in Karachi drive into gaps that we English people would barely recognize as gaps, and would never dream of driving into.

Many opportunities only come because we wait on the Lord and then respond to his leading.

Go to that person, pray for the other, and ring someone else.

Others follow where we lead.

It's great that most well intentioned people follow the lead of the pioneers at some point and come on board, but there will always be procrastinators: the fence sitters – the ones who sit with folded arms and who need a great deal of convincing – it can be really hard work trying to implement something that you are pretty convinced you have seen from the Lord, and you know will work really well if it is given its chance, but if people are afraid to try. Don't give up half way. Press on! But keep your antennae up on how to help people who are struggling. Many people drift off out of church because nobody took the time and trouble to sit down with them and hear how they are really feeling, and what is on their heart. So often that is all it would have taken to have avoided a meltdown.

Finally there are the saboteurs. (You can hear the dark music accompanying this sentence). We need a lot of discernment here. The temptation is to leap to act on Paul's warning to Titus: 'Warn a

divisive person once, then warn them again, then having nothing more to do with them. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.’

But is the person actually being divisive or are they simply hurt? There is a world of difference between someone who is intent on following his own agenda, and a genuinely wounded person who is lashing out.

You can see it at school when someone is really nasty to others, when deep down what they are really longing for is a friend. They are reacting out of hurt and insecurity. What love David Wilkerson showed in pursuing Nicky Cruz, the gangster we spoke of earlier, who had threatened to kill him with his knife. David understood what was going on, and he literally took his life in his hands – and just thinks of the countless changed lives that have come about because he persevered and didn’t give up on God’s call.

So although the “obvious” thing might be to try to find ways to by pass these resisters and saboteurs, Roget suggests that may actually be really important to do everything you can to keep them on board, or to bring them on board. Although their resistance may be rooted purely in prejudice, they may also have seen particular dimensions of the issue that nobody else has, in which case they need to be listened to.

We need the Lord’s discernment when to steer well clear and to move on, not waste hours *almost* helping someone, when we could be giving ourselves to others who really ill be helped – and when to hang on in there and persevere, remembering the Lord command through Jude: “be merciful to those who doubt.” (Jude 1:22)

When Jesus said that he was going to go to Lazarus, who had already died, Thomas said to the rest of the disciples, "Let us also go, that **we may die** with him." Do any of us have a Thomas-like heart? You know – glass more half empty than half full.

Elsewhere we find Thomas, the realist doubter, saying to Jesus, "Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?" Does Jesus round on him like a disappointed teacher and say, “you ought to know the answer to that by now?” No, he releases this incredibly powerful and all important truth: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

When Thomas doubts the testimony of the other disciples concerning their claim to have seen Jesus resurrected from the dead, Jesus takes the time and trouble to seek him out and show himself to him – just as he went to meet Peter after he had denied Him. And Thomas bows before him and says ‘my Lord and my God.’

What has happened? A seeming ‘procrastinator’ has been the means of releasing an important truth – and a fence sitter’s heart has been changed. Henceforth, according to tradition, Thomas would be a fearless apostle to India.

There’s one thing I would add to that. Don’t give up on yourself either. Let me say again, you never know what the Lord can do for and through you, unless You give Him the chance to do it!

So let me ask you, how do you handle the old truism that *Constant change is here to stay*? Do you instinctively warm to the thought of change, and embrace it wholeheartedly? Or does it represent a threat that you are prepared to go a long way to avoid? People anticipate change in entirely different ways: for some it is an adventure, for others something to dread. If there are underlying insecurities in our lives that have never really been dealt with, change can feel harder to hard handle because our trust levels are low. Fear of failure if faced with something new is common. Or of running out of resources- whether emotional, financial, time, strength, or inspiration; or of being left behind...or of appearing stupid.

Most of us are probably somewhere between these two extremes, but all of us will experience strong changes of fortune come our way – and all of us will need patience and perseverance when longed for change is slow in coming, and the temptation is just to forget all about change altogether. My great uncle used to say that the prize is given for one thing only in Biblical terms, and it is only given at the very end: it is for perseverance. Jesus taught so much about it because He knew how much we would need it.

Now when God has some clear an end in view He is undoubtedly unflinching in the way He directs us.

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea.

Understanding that can make us think that what God asks of us will always be hard. That is not good for our intimacy with the Lord. In fact it can wreak havoc with our spiritual love life. Jesus wants us to love Him, and to trust that if He's doing something that is hard, He's doing it for a good reason – which we may or may not be able to understand.

The important thing is not to let changes that are forced on us to knock our trust levels out – that is always the enemy's ultimate aim. The Lord is changing us from glory to glory and preparing us for Heaven

Remember: without courage we achieve nothing of lasting value for the Kingdom. 'And we are God's house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast'. (Heb. 3:6)

The situations that come our way are our training ground – even those which we thought God would never allow coming our way – and this life is our one and only training ground for eternity. It's an amazing thought that 99.999999% of our lives lies ahead of us. .

But the devil loves to make you think that this happiness that you are experiencing is only just for the moment; it's just a coincidence; it won't last forever. You are destined for a hard and gloomy lot! It will all catch up with you! Take such thoughts captive, Paul urges, don't agree with the devil's assessment of things. The Accuser of the brethren can spin a good yarn, but why should he be right about this? Isn't God bigger than Satan's gloomy suggestions??

Doubt your doubts and affirm God's goodness.

Otherwise we will end of wary of what God may throw our way, which in turn will make us prepared to settle for less, or to cave in quicker.

The devil is always angling for a subconscious pact along the lines of "I won't trouble you if you won't trouble me". Thirty years ago I read this verse in psalm 112, "The righteous man has no fear of bad news," so how did I respond? I spent a week expecting bad news through the post!

The disciples could not understand the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. Mark 6:52 in the TEV says 'their minds could not grasp it.' God wants us to enlarge our minds by His Spirit to be able to grasp more of His goodness towards us. Otherwise our minds risk quenching the person and work of the Holy Spirit – and the effects of that cramping will spread outwards like ripples, affecting our inner freedom, or willingness to witness, even the way we church together. Effectively, we become rationalists rather than people who are truly led by the Lord.

If all things work together for good in the Lord, then it will help to look on the changes in our lives more as stepping stones than as boulders sent to stone us. If you find it hard to say that worry is a sin, then try turning it the other way round: It is not a sin not to worry! Worry is like driving with one foot on the brake

The one thing that impresses Jesus is when He meets with faith. - and He has been impressed by so many of you, and you have responded faithfully to really testing situations. Ok, He's also seen the times when we have not responded so well but He wants to help us onward.

Remember our starting verses Listen to this version of PHIL 4:4-6 in THE MESSAGE

'Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns. Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life.'

When you feel the prompting to do something generous, or to show sympathy, or to pass on a warning or an encouragement; don't fail to act on it – even if it is rather inconvenient to do so, Don't allow excuses to hold us back.

Jesus didn't rise from the dead in order to set up a safety club.

“Make the most of every opportunity’ (Col. 4:5)

The wonder is that when we face our failings, the Lord is prepared to forgive us what we have failed to do so, as well as the unhelpful things that we have done.

Think of people in Bible days going through times of real change:

May our courage match our calling
to go for the things He is calling us to . . .
particular relationships to foster,
people to reach out to,
and specific initiatives and endeavours to develop.
May the Lord jog us when we are tempted to leave for another day
things we should be attending to today.

Jesus when the crowds stopped singing hosanna to the son of David and screamed out instead Crucify Him

David who lost his employer's good will, lost his wife, his position at court, and had to flee for his life with Saul hurling javelins at him.

Novels that get your attention often start with some change of fortune that induces tension and hold people's interest. The Bible doesn't hold back from showing people going through major times of change. I don't know whether you have ever thought about your life as being a “soap”, but many of us know what it is to have God turning things inside out for us on a fairly regular basis. Constant change is here to stay and we need grace to be able to adjust and adapt.

For those of us who are in the *midst* of change, and who don't have their testimony nice and complete with all the ends tied up, let's ask the Lord to move in and through the change process. That may be the crossroads that a number of you are at; it will almost certainly be where many people you know find themselves.

In a moment I am going to make a framework to release faith in small groups for prayer for situations that we know about. Before we do that, I would like to pray a general prayer for us all to be able to handle change better.

In the face of the changes that we face, may we know when all we have to do is to yield to You – and when we are called to resist whatever it is that the enemy is trying to hinder.

Lord, You say that we are being changed from glory into glory. May we not lose sight of that!

In the daily round of things, when everything feels as though it is unfurling either alarmingly fast or painfully slow, help us to practice catching Your call and to be open to Your nudges. Then we will be ready when Your call comes for bigger things!

Thank you that You are the only and only who is always the same, and that there is no shadow of changing with You.