

Sermon Given by

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### Mark 2:18-22 - "New wine"

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It's been said that you can tell the size of a ship which has sailed on by and past out of sight by the huge wake which it leaves behind. That observation, I think, holds true when it comes to a consideration of the Christian faith.

How remarkable it is that we are sitting here thousands of miles away from where the event x just read to us about and thousands of years after it happened. It's remarkable – unless with the coming of Jesus Christ a massive ship has been past – and that is why we still can see the wake of the ship today...

Jesus coming split human history in two: it was of such huge significance that life can never be the same again.

Of course that isn't something which is always very welcome. That very popular book *The Shack* called *God The Grand Interferer*. And certainly that title is how many people thought about Jesus during his lifetime.

In the section we are looking at in Mark's account, up to Mark 3:6 there a sense of the gathering storm... It is made up of a number of different scenes of conflict between Jesus and his opponents: to the point in 3:6 where they leave and begin plotting to kill Jesus

Just to refresh your memories on what has come before the little bit we are looking at today, let's go back to the start of Chapter 2. Look how the opposition intensifies:

- in 2:1-12. where the paralysed man is lowered through the roof. The criticism of Jesus is very muted: in fact it's unspoken. The Pharisees just think their questions: why's he doing that, claiming to forgive sins?
- in 2:13-17 which we looked at last week, the opposition is a bit more bold, but they don't yet go direct to Jesus: They make a sideswipe at Jesus, addressed to the disciples: why does he associate with sinners like Levi?
- Then in our passage today 2:18-22: it's a direct approach to Jesus, but their criticism this time is directed against the disciples. 'Jesus, Why don't they tow the party line?' or in fact the non-partying line, as we'll see.

You get the sense hopefully of the Pharisees intensifying opposition to Jesus. They do not welcome the Grand Interferer and the huge change he is introducing into human history – and therefore into their lives.

Now, we know that the Pharisees are supposed to be the bad guys and it's very easy to look at Jesus' opponents and immediately write ourselves out of the script. We think: 'well of course I'd never be like that'.

But the Pharisaical heart isn't some despicable minority heart condition, from way back in history. The Pharisaical heart is typical of the human heart: including yours and mine. It's the way we are by nature in September 2010. We don't naturally welcome the big ship of Jesus passing through human history and interfering in our lives.

And yet... Jesus is making the point that his interference in our lives is well worth it – and I hope we will all be persuaded of that today.

**The issue at stake is the dawning of a new era – a new covenant between God and his people.**

Jesus makes his point in answer to a question re fasting: v 18 ***18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?"***

I wonder if they were objecting to the massive party that Levi had thrown, complete with a dozen cases of chateau Capernaum wine.

Whatever, the Pharisees use that old strategy of divide and conquer; they are trying to separate Jesus from his supposed allies, John the Baptist... and in verse 19 Jesus proceeds to explain the radical change he has brought in.

***19 Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.***

By implication, Jesus is saying that there is nothing wrong with fasting per se. It was commanded once a year on Day of Atonement, the day the Israelites particularly focussed on their sin and the lifting of the threat of Judgment.

And fasting had become important to Israelite nation whenever it became obvious to them that they were a nation under judgment. That was the case at the time.

God had described himself as their Lover, even their husband, but the Covenant or relationship between them and their God was obviously on the Rocks. What else could you conclude when they were an occupied nation, over-run by Gentiles?

So fasting **had been** appropriate, implies Jesus ...but not now he has come. 'I've come to deal with Israel's spiritual problem, to pay for sin and lift the threat of judgment. Are you honestly saying my followers should have long faces, when wedding bells are ringing?'

'Come on', says Jesus. 'When did you last go to a wedding party and see bare tables and everyone dressed in black. My disciples are partying, because I'm here and I'm the Bridegroom'.

He's picking up that idea of God being Israel's husband and applying it to himself. 'With me here,' implies Jesus, 'now's not the time for these rituals, but for celebrating the re-opening of the relationship between God and man. I'm offering people my hand in marriage'

It's like that bit in the wedding service, if you will allow me to rephrase the question which gets asked. 'Saviour, will you take this sinner to be yours, to have and to hold from this day forward?' 'Yes!' says Jesus without a seconds hesitation. 'I will'.

The question is then 'Sinner, will you have this Saviour to be yours, from this day forward?' And the moment anyone says yes, a new permanent relationship is formed. That is exactly what had happened just a moment earlier in Levi's experience. And that's a cause for Joy now for the disciples...

Of course says Jesus there **will** be tears again verse 20 ***But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.***

A black day is coming when your bridegroom will be taken away and rejected. You may want to mourn then, perhaps. But even then it probably won't be with the tears of being back in the nightmare situation of sin and judgment; that threat has passed for God's people. Any tears now will simply be the fasting of living in a world that's rejected Christ and rejected God's offer of a relationship.

So if Jesus had been speaking to our generation, after the cross, when he was taken away what would he say? Which is appropriate for us: fasting? Or feasting?

We used to ask children in young people's work whether their faces were like tea pots or coffee pots- and possibly that's slightly unhelpful, because a Christian's joy and sadness can't always be seen on the face. But which are we basically supposed to be?

I think we have to say both. The reality is that as a friend of mine put it, Christians are sad, happy people. Because Jesus, the bridegroom, isn't physically with us, there is an element of fasting to Christian experience today. But if you ask me whether we are in a better situation than John the Baptist's disciples, yes. Jesus is with us by his spirit and wonderfully we'll be with him physically at the marriage feast in heaven.

In Jesus presence, certainly, 2000 years ago, Old Testament fasting was no longer appropriate...

What Jesus is saying should be very helpful for understanding the tension of Christian experience. Jesus is saying that before his coming fasting was fine: in a nation under judgment looking on to the day when a new covenant or relationship with God would be introduced fasting was absolutely right.

When Christ comes that new covenant era is begun; he is the Bridegroom so in Christ's presence there'll be feasting not fasting. But what about when he's rejected: there is an overlap period. In Christ's absence there must be some element of fasting.

There is much that makes us sad: Christians are forgiven but the world is still under threat of judgment, and we're not yet face to face with Christ.

Sometimes other Christians make us feel very inadequate... perhaps we see them singing and they seem so close to Jesus. If we're honest we feel frankly a bit bored by the songs at church or just plain out of sorts. Well don't let other people's emotions be the barometer by which you test your Christian life.

The reality now is that we have both feasting and fasting in our present day experience. There are moments of intimacy with Jesus, yes – certainly he's with us by his spirit; but we know we aren't yet

in Jesus' physical presence. That lies in the future when we'll be with him wonderfully at marriage in heaven.

So are Christians today meant to fast or to feast? Probably both. It's worth saying that many Christians do, literally, fast from time to time, some even regularly. That is fine; but the overall note of our lives must be feasting, because we have much to celebrate. If I say fasting and feasting the overall emphasis should be on feasting. The glass is definitely half full not half empty!

Perhaps it would be helpful to apply this to the whole realm of relationships, since the image Jesus is using is marriage. Doesn't Jesus teaching here answer the fear that some people have that they will be single forever. It's a very real fear, and not just for those who haven't been married.

In normal circumstances, one person out of each married couple will go through singleness in the future again, if their spouse dies before them. And that could be for a long time.

Some Christians talk about being left on shelf. But what Jesus is saying tells us that God has no shelf. Every follower of Christ has a relationship which makes the most perfect human relationship seem insipid by comparison...

I wonder if you've ever caught some unexpected scent or fragrance which transported you in imagination to a different world. Maybe something as humdrum as the smell of the polish in your primary school: and suddenly you're back there in imagination. Well, there are things in this life that point us not so much backwards as onwards and upwards – on to the future.

And our experience of human love is like that: it points beyond itself to a deeper experience which we all need: the love of God - a relationship which is open to us now in Jesus and which will one day be fully realised in heaven.

That reality had come, which meant that Old Testament fasting was no longer appropriate...

In fact **fasting** is the tip of the iceberg. **Everything** has changed since Jesus comes. That's what he says in those striking images in verses 21-2

*<sup>21</sup>"No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. <sup>22</sup>And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins."*

It's important we understand that this is not first and foremost challenging the Pharisees reluctance to change at all. I think at times these verses have been quoted to justify an attitude which says simply: out with the old in with the new. Which is very tempting: to alter the words of an old hymn. Like a mighty tortoise moves the church of God, Christians, we are treading where we have always trod.

Churches are pretty conservative places, and it would be tempting to view this as a simple charter for change. But that is to forget what Jesus has just been saying about himself as the Bridegroom. It is **the coming of Jesus** which has introduced the new element in God's relationship with human beings.

So the old and the new here stand for the Old Testament relationship God had with his people and the New Testament relationship or covenant.

Jesus hasn't come simply to patch up the old covenant... so the whole Old Testament system before J comes is an old garment, which Jesus improves when he comes. That's the first picture Jesus gives. And Jesus hasn't come simply to fit in to the old covenant – where the Old wineskin is the Old Testament structures before Jesus comes and then Jesus just tops that way of relating to God up - when he comes, he fits in. No way - if you do the equivalent with wine and wineskins, you will have wine on the floor and skins must be thrown away.

Instead a new era has come, with the coming of Jesus. And things can never be the same again.

I think Don Carson expresses it very well: 'With the dawning of the kingdom, the traditional structures of life and forms of piety would change. It would be inappropriate to graft the new onto the old, as if the old were the supporting structure – in precisely the same way that it is inappropriate to repair a large rent in an old garment by using new unshrunk cloth, or use old and brittle wineskins to contain new wine still fermenting, whose gases will doubtless explode the old skin. The old does not support the new; it points to it, prepares for it and then gives way to it. Thus Jesus prepares his disciples for the massive changes that were dawning'.

If you want a more contemporary illustration of it, I was struck reading about the situation on the roads in China at the moment. There are traffic jams which make our Bank Holiday driving look a piece of cake... Recently there was a 62 mile jam from Beijing to Inner Mongolia, 10,000 cars which took 9 days to disperse – and that was one gridlock amongst many...

The article commented that building new roads wasn't the answer – car ownership is going up by 20% each month! Adding on a few roads is not going to solve the situation.

What is needed is a new system: a state of the art 21<sup>st</sup> century rail network would inaugurate a bright new day which the road system could only point to... You can see the slogan: 'This is the age of the train.'

It's like that with Christ: the coming of Jesus is lift-off in the purposes of God. Things can never be the same again. All the Old Testament structures were useful in pointing on to Jesus and they've now been fulfilled.

A wonderful new relationship with God is open to us through Jesus and sure, we are not in heaven yet; but to live as if Jesus hadn't come is like winding the clock back into the Dark Ages.

If that happens we are not reckoning on the huge difference that Jesus makes. It's like when a huge ship has gone past. In fact in all human history there has been nothing bigger than this.

He has entered our world and lived a life that no-one else before or after has even come close to. He died on the cross so we can be completely forgiven for living for ourselves, ignoring God and his standards.

And then stamped unmistakably in history there is the fact of his resurrection which tells us we cannot just shrug our shoulders and walk away as if nothing has happened.

Tim Keller pastors a number of congregations in New York and he reckons that in any of his congregations as many as 20% of the men present would have some measure of same sex sexual desires. He was asked once what he said to anyone who told him they were unwilling to become a Christian because they were gay.

His answer was very telling. In that situation he often asks: 'What bearing does your sexuality have on the issue of whether or not Jesus Christ rose from the dead?' That's a helpful question to ask, isn't it? Because it focuses on the primary issue.

Of course we could shift it from the **sexual** area to whatever obstacle fits with us here. Maybe we think: I can't really follow Christ because of my depression. And without wanting to downplay how difficult depression is, I want to ask gently but firmly: What bearing does your depression have on whether or not Jesus Christ rose from the dead?

The chief thing to settle in our heads is about Jesus? Did God really enter human history two thousand years ago? Did Jesus die on the cross and then rise from the dead? Because if he did, then that affects everything; it will affect my religious practice and make changes there. It will affect my emotional life as well – so that over time at any rate, my life is characterised increasingly by joy and gratitude and hopefulness.

The course of human history has been changed for the better and the course of human lives can be changed as well. And what a tragedy if somehow we were to miss out...

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Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)