

Mark 2: 13-22

Pymble 4.2.18

Wisdom of the old to recognize the power of the new

Jesus is getting himself in trouble again.

Actually, this is pretty early in Mark's gospel and is only the second mention of any controversy, but it is a foretaste of things to come.

So let's notice what it is that actually aggravates his accusers:

- it's the company Jesus keeps
- and the acts of piety he fails to do.

In response to these criticisms

Jesus speaks enigmatically about wine and wineskins and patches on clothing

that serve as a comment on the religious practice of his time.

But these words are not that easy for us to apply today.

Will our structures also inevitably burst?

Are our Church habits and traditions incompatible with the new wine of Jesus?

And, more positively, what is the Church called to do and be in these sayings?

Just to be clear on the details of Jesus' first century images:

to fix a tear in a piece of clothing you could mend it with a small patch, as we could today.

But if you used a patch of material that had not been pre-shrunk, the patch could tear away on first wash, and you would make a worse tear in the garment.

Again in a slightly different image, wine was stored in animal skins,

but if new unfermented wine was put into an old skin

that had already stretched to its maximum,

then the fermenting process would burst the skins and all would be lost.

So new wine would have to be put into new wineskins

that could cope with the expansion of the wine.

So what is Jesus getting at?

Jesus seems to be saying there is something incompatible with the new way; the new life that he brings and the ways religious groups usually behave – demonstrated by the Pharisees' complaints.

When it comes to **God**,

religions often take what ought to be a living experience of the Sacred, suck all the joy from it,

and turn it into an unappetizing bunch of rules and regulations.
And when it comes to **people**,
they exchange Jesus' radical love and welcome
for practices that exclude others.

So Jesus is not making a comment about the superiority
of Christianity over Judaism, as some claim –
that would be anachronistic.
Nor is this about how much better the doctrine grace is
over observance of the Jewish law.
Rather, Jesus is making a broader statement
about ***the very DNA of any religious group*** –
that like old wineskins, they tend to dry out,
become less flexible, and are threatened by anything new.
When we understand this,
we can begin to do the painful but necessary work
of hearing Jesus' words as a cautionary critique
not just about the Pharisees,
but about ourselves, about the Church today,
and about any institution that deals with the Sacred.

For there are two things:
there is the life-giving gospel, that like good wine,
brings joy and community,
and there is the religious organisation
that seeks to contain and manage that life.
Our job is to stay focused on the supremacy of the former
even as we spend time in the latter.
That is, to prioritise the experience of God,
the joy Jesus brings,
the values he lived,
the inclusion he practiced.
For these are primary!
This is where life is found!
This is good news!
This is what people will respond to!
But so often we get distracted by the wineskins –
Church structures, committees and regulations;
outdated practices and dead rituals.
We go to the stake over music styles,
whether we use books or the screen, or sit in pews or chairs.
We expend far too much energy on the cultural wrappings of our faith
forgetting the valuable gift that lies at the heart of who we are
as God's people.

The warning in Christ's words

is that the new wine of Christ's way
has a power and a potency that will burst the wineskins
should they prove inflexible.
Often the institution struggles to cope with the new thing;
it tries to regulate it, bind it, control it.
But if it is of God,
the new wine will break the shackles
and do its work of bringing glorious new life to parched souls;
that is, transforming individuals and communities.

So there is warning in Jesus words
but there is also the desire to hold the two together.
After all, the aim of patching the hole
is to keep the garment, not throw it out;
and there is never any desire for all the wine to be lost.
There is an element of inevitability, even judgement in Jesus words,
but for those of us who have been around for a while,
who are part of St Wineskin's, the exhortation is I think two-fold:

- to remain attuned to the primary things of God,
- and to remain flexible with the secondary things of the Church.

We will do well if we don't mix these up.

As you know the Village planning group
is going through the discernment process
for a fresh expression of church in our area
that we will be able to sponsor together.
We don't know what that will look like yet, but one thing is for sure –
it is no use going to all this effort to offer people a dried out wineskin.
They rightly want good wine!
Our passion is that through prayer and the Spirit's help
we will offer something that is the real deal
for a new group of people in our changing part of Sydney:

- a genuine connection with the Sacred,
- an authentic and life-changing walk with Christ,
- a sense of meaning and purpose,
- forgiveness and wholeness,
- an experience of the hospitality of God and of true community
- and all the other things that are so compelling
about the new wine that Christ offers.

And our job as a faithful group of God's people
might be to sponsor that new thing,
and to be flexible enough in order for it to grow,
rather than being so rigid and critical that it won't have a chance.
That way the two can grow together,

and the wine wont be lost,
nor the garment torn.

May we be bold and faithful to embrace the future
into which God is leading us.