

Matthew's Musing, July 18th

I can be intrigued by the way a parable comes to life and has meaning at several levels. I was reading the parable of the new wine and it suddenly 'came to life' for me. Here it is:

- 37** And no one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise the new wine will burst the skins and will be spilled, and the skins will be destroyed.
38 But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins.
39 And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, "The old is good."

Here's a picture of a goat skin being used for carrying water. In Jesus' time goat skins were also used for wine.

Goatskin was a good, reliable container. I gather you could put new wine in a new goatskin, and the skin would expand if there was any lingering fermentation. New wine put in an old wineskin would probably be lost because the skin would tear. And even if the goatskin remained intact, the flavour would be tainted.



So new wine went into new wineskins.

So why the parable? Jesus was in hot dispute with the Pharisees and Scribes – the leaders of the worshipping community of the day. They were objecting to his working on the Sabbath e.g. by healing, or picking ears of wheat, feasting rather than fasting, and, truly scandalously, the feasting was with outsiders, the Samaritans!

I have some sympathy with these leaders because they were seeking to be obedient to God's will as they knew it. But... Jesus seemed to be saying God's invitation to engagement with Him was changing. For the leaders, this was shocking and decidedly uncomfortable.

So why did Jesus choose this imagery?

Jesus was conveying to the Pharisees that the old familiar way of approaching God called the Law of Moses, the way of getting life right, of leading a good life, the way of the Covenant with Abraham and Moses, was being transformed.

The New covenant would be one of relationship rather than rules. It would be one of grace rather than law. The wedding at Cana saw Jesus turning water into wine – a metaphor for changing the water of the Old Testament way into the rich wine of the New Testament way. Instead of trying endlessly to please God, people were being invited to enjoy God for who he was. It took me a long time to grasp the significance of this.

I notice Jesus does not dismiss the old wine, the old covenant. He says, "the old is good." The law is a good way to approach God, but the new wine is better. It is richer. It is liberating.

There's a kind of inversion going on. The old way of the law constantly points out my shortcomings, my failings in holiness. The new way invites me to hear the Father saying, "Look how well you are doing. Well done. Keep it up."

The first Christians were all Israelites who received the new wine freely. They let go of their repeated pilgrimages to Jerusalem. They let go of the 600+ dos and don'ts extrapolated from the ten commandments. And they accepted instead relationship with the God who loves people.

So if the parable is an exploration of the move from Old Testament to New Testament, is it relevant today? I think the answer is something like this:

Before we come to faith in Jesus, we all have an old wine: i.e. our set of assumptions around the existence and nature of God. This old wine certainly carried us through life. For me, the old wine was an understanding of a God who was absent, inactive, not relevant to my day to day life. I did acknowledge a set of "do's" and "don'ts" which in a vague way came from God. Then I discovered the new wine of Jesus and realised the old wine had faded and lost its attraction.

I wonder whether this has been true for you, or is still the issue for you? All I can say is, "taste and see!"

The parable offers another insight: my faith has evolved over the decades. New insights and new understandings and new responses to the Lord's love of me have taken me out of familiar liturgy and hymnody into new ways of worship and prayer. Sometimes this has been disconcerting and even seen me getting cross when it looked like I was being led towards what is called 'happy clappy' Christianity. It was only when I joined in that I understood this was a profound way of expressing and feeding my faith.

So roll on the next vintage! Amen.