

MOVE ON!

Isaiah 40:21-31 and Mark 1: 29-39

I like to give titles to my sermons – a pithy way of capturing the gist of what is being preached that morning. Based on our two readings today I have chosen the title: “Move On!” What does that little phrase mean to you? What images come to mind? Think about all the ways in which we use those two words together. For example:

- “Move on!” – a command even a reprimand from the police to voyeurs at the scene of an accident or crime
- “Get a move on” – that’s one I can imagine my mother saying to me in exasperation as I dithered and dilly-dallied or shilly-shallied (other words she would tend to use with it)
- “Time to move on” – there’s a hint of optimism in this phrase, but generally it’s wistful or nostalgic, as if the moving is being done reluctantly and as a last resort. And of course we sometimes euphemistically talk of being “moving on” when they have died.
- “I must move on” – this is similar, but a bit stronger. When grieving we sometime use this phrase, recognising that there comes a point when we should turn our minds to new things, but there is still within it a yearning for times past, a reluctance to let go.

You may be able to think of some other such phrases, but what struck me about this exercise, was that the majority of our uses of those two words, Move On, are at least tinged with negative emotions. On the face of it moving and especially moving onwards or forwards is a positive step, but somehow when we use that phrase we yet manage to turn it into a negative. Strange.

So this morning I want us to reflect a little more upon what moving on might entail in God’s economy. Will we find that selfsame sense of reluctance when we examine the concept of onward movement in our lectionary readings for today?

Let’s begin with that passage from Isaiah:

Do you not know; have you not heard, the Lord the everlasting God ... grows neither weary nor faint ... He gives vigour to the weary, new strength to the exhausted ... they will grow wings like eagles, they will run and not be weary, they will march and never grow faint

That is not so much a passage to be preached as one to be breathed in deeply so that it pervades the whole of our being, and then slowly exhaled so that it informs our every action. When I hear that passage in my mind’s eye I am listening to Ian Charleston standing high in some Edinburgh pulpit portraying the great Eric Liddle in *Chariots of Fire*, and then I can see him later in that same film hurtling down the home straight – “they will grow wings of eagles” – in the 400m at the 1924 Olympics – “they will run and not be weary” – as he breaks the tape and claims the gold medal, for himself, for his country, but most of all for God.

It’s inspiring stuff. But is that you, or is that me? Is it frequently not more accurate to picture ourselves as a bedraggled, exhausted heap on the track, having stumbled over some hurdle and now sprawled, forlorn and spent, without an ounce of strength or hope left in our sinews? I exaggerate, perhaps, but did you hear that verse in the middle of the Isaiah reading: “Why do you complain, O Jacob, and you, O Israel, why do you say ‘my plight is hidden from the Lord?’”

Perhaps we are not quite sprawled across the track, but is it not the case that we complain too much about the hand that God has dealt us?

Whether we are lying across the track or sat there complaining, it is time to Move On! Rev I.M Jolly used to tell us of some good advice he received. “Cheer up”, friends would tell him, “things could be worse”. And then he would tell us the result: “And Lo, things did get worse!” Wise words, for there is no guarantee that things will get better and, that being so, we may as well be cheerful as complaining. More importantly, if rather than spending our time dwelling on what is wrong with the world we instead look at what is right with God - then our complaining, our despair, our fear will melt away and we will soar on wings as eagles. Read again those words of Isaiah and you will find images of God as Creator, God as Redeemer and God as Sustainer of his people. If those images be true, if we dwell upon them, how can we complain, how can we despair? Instead, let us Move On in hope, trust and confidence.

Turning now to our gospel reading, there in the heart of it we heard the words of Jesus “Let us move on to the country towns in the neighbourhood; I have to proclaim my message there also.” At first sight this may seem a strange thing for Jesus to do. His ministry in the city was going extremely well: he was healing many people, he was teaching them with an unheard of authority; word about him was being spoken all over the district and large crowds gathered everywhere he went. What need was there to move on? We may speculate that he was exhausted by all the activity – maybe he couldn’t cope with the crowds any more and felt the need for space; or maybe he was worried that that people were coming to him purely because of his fame and his performer’s power. As often in Mark’s gospel we are left guessing. But there is one extra piece of evidence in this passage, in v34. When Jesus healed someone, in the belief system of that time, it mean that an evil spirit (or devil) was banished from them. Mark tells us that Jesus would not let these devils speak, and why? ... because they knew who he was. Perhaps Jesus moved on for this precise reason – he didn’t want people to know who he was.

That may seem like a perverse reason for Jesus to move on. But it’s worth pondering. Today there is no shortage of people prepared to say who Jesus is – to say it loudly and clearly to anyone who will listen. And it’s not just Christians who are like this, the same kind of raucous self-confident cries emanate from Jews and Muslims and other faiths, and within those faiths from sects and denominations. But Jesus, rather than have those voices heard, moved on to another place. And Jesus attributed such voices to devils. The more you ponder this, the more it seems like dynamite. Could it be that we are not called to tell the world who Jesus is? Could it be that we are encouraged to move on instead?

There have been reams written on this aspect of Mark’s gospel, the so-called Messianic Secret. We aren’t going to solve that mystery here this morning, but it is worth reflecting on from time to time. If it applied to Jesus then so much more it applies to us: quit telling and move on! We are not expected to say everything, to know everything, to do everything, to achieve everything by ourselves – after the seeds have been sown it is often better to move on, leaving others to tend the crops and reap the harvest, leaving behind just sufficient intrigue so as to attract, tantalise and challenge others to Christ, leaving God to do God’s work in God’s own mysterious ways.

Finally, I want us to consider what this command to “Move on” might mean in the context of our present Circuit Review. Rather than do this directly, I would like to quote a few paragraphs

from the magazine of the church I used to worship at in Australia, which has after a long period of discernment recently merged with another church. Their minister writes this month:

The key to the journey is to leave home, leave the familiar. This is contrary to what we do in our church and our life. Before we leave something, we like to know what we are moving towards. We like to have an idea and a concept of what the future might look like before committing ourselves to it. In all the stories of the calling to discipleship in our sacred text, the call to follow is not clear. They are not given a map or a full strategic or concept plan of what the following will entail. And not all follow. In fact when Jesus is asked by a potential disciple to describe what they must do, or what it might look like, the individual usually goes away sad, for it is too hard or will cost too much.

I have heard it described that the call to discipleship is a state of liminality. In other words, the journey of discipleship is a 'between' times space. It is a stepping off from the threshold. When one stands on the threshold of something, one does not necessarily know what the outcome will be, or what the future will hold. One does not step off from the threshold without leaving the tried and true. And one does not step off from the threshold knowing what will replace what has been left.

Part of the culture we have inherited, part of the culture of being church and Christian we have inherited is the opposite of being in this liminal space. Most if not all of us have grown up in a context where we want to be very clear about the way things are, and to be certain about what things are going to look like before we decide whether or not to do something.

But the new beginning we have before us is not so certain. We cannot say that it will look like this or that. We cannot say how we will be changed by the journey or what we will learn along the way. We cannot say for certain what we should be doing as a church, and we certainly cannot say that what we are doing now as a church will be what we will do in two, three or five years' time. We cannot say that we won't be disrupted, or hurt, or wounded or broken. And we certainly cannot enter into the new beginning with firmly held opinions or beliefs that we will stoically and dogmatically cling to.

All we can do is hear the call to follow, and then decide. Will we, like the disciples, leave our home and our nets; will we leave our families, and the familiar; will we leave our culturally entrenched ways, our inherited values and beliefs, even our inherited ideas and beliefs about God, Jesus and the church? Will we step off the threshold into an unknown space and context and really have a new beginning?

In short, will we, in faith, Move On?