

1. The Hope of Transformation **(Acts 9 : 1 – 20 & John 21 : 1 – 14)**

Introduction

For the next six weeks we are going to be looking at ‘change’ because that’s what the book, “The Life You’ve Always Wanted’ is all about; transformation – change. I love those jokes about people changing a light bulb :

How many real men does it take to screw in a light bulb?

None. Real men aren't afraid of the dark.

How many lawyers does it take to change a light bulb?

One, but he'll bill you for five!

How many Prime Ministers does it take to change a light bulb?

Prime Ministers never change light bulbs, they prefer to keep the public in the dark.

How many Charismatics does it take to change a light bulb?

Only one because his hands are up in the air anyway.

How many Anglicans does it take to change a light bulb?

Change??!!

Change! Some of us love it, some of us fear it, some of us can't think why we need it as we think things are fine as they are. But change is inevitable; each one of us is changing a little every day. In fact scientists have come up with a special term to describe organisms which are *not* constantly changing – it's ‘DEAD’!

If we are not changing physically we are dead – and if we are not changing spiritually we are spiritually dead or at least stagnant. Change is, or should be, our spiritual goal and I hope that the next six weeks will help each one of us to grow and change in our faith.

Outline of the Series

Last year I read an excellent book which, although hasn't changed my life, has made a significant impact on my spiritual life. It's called, "The Life You've always Wanted" by John Ortberg.

Whenever I suggest a sermon series at our monthly Staff Meeting Chris usually comments, "Peter's read another book then!". It's true and I make no apology for commending this book to you and encouraging you to make all the sermons in the series. Don't worry if you do miss one as the text will be on the website and we are also hoping to record them on tape or CD.

I also suggest that you may like to order a copy of the book from The Well as I won't be quoting vast chapters from it (and in any case we don't use all the chapters). There is also a Guide for Housegroups so if any of you are taken with the ideas raised then you can follow up the discussions in your small groups.

The subtitle of the book is 'Spiritual Disciplines for ordinary people'. The words 'spiritual disciplines' seems heavy and perhaps a bit off-putting. I tried to read a book on spiritual disciplines a couple of years ago and ended up feeling very depressed as I seemed to be failing in all the areas it covered – and the remedies it offered just made me feel worse.

The beauty of this book is that it aims to help us to grow without making us feel guilty and a complete Christian dunce! We'll be covering six areas :

Today – change and how we do it? Then on to ...

25 April – Practice of Celebration. (developing joy in our lives)

9 May – Practice of Slowing. (making time in a busy world).

16 May – Practice of Appropriate Smallness. (our life of service)

23 May – Practice of a Guided Life. (listening to the Spirit)

30 May – Developing a rule of life. (how to plan to keep growing)

1. Is Change Possible?

So, is change possible in our daily walk with Jesus? I hope we'd say a resounding 'yes'!

You only have to look at our two readings this morning to see that it is so. In the gospel reading we see Jesus' disciples changing from a hopeless band of men, feeling the disappointment of seeing Jesus killed into people with purpose and a message for the world.

In Acts 9 we meet Saul, the infant church's arch-persecutor, on a mission to wipe out the followers of Jesus. He meets with the risen Lord in a dramatic way and we find that over the coming months he changes into Paul, the leader of the Gentile church and one of the main contributors to our New Testament.

I look at my own life of faith and see a great deal of change. I don't think you would recognise me if a twenty year old Peter Hall walked through those doors this morning. Obviously I would be very much slimmer and with more hair on my head (!) but essentially my character would be unrecognisable to you. Before you would stand a person who was vaguely seeking meaning in life – seeking God even – but not a Christian and a person with some very ungodly habits and tendencies. I thank God (literally) that change is possible and indeed it is his desire for us that we continue to change to be more like Jesus.

In his book, John Ortberg calls this change or transformation "*morphing*". Do you remember the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers? The characters in the story were able to 'morph' – to gain a supernatural power and change into something amazing. They were ordinary people but when they 'morphed' they were able to do extraordinary things.

The term ‘morph’ come from a Greek word used in the New Testament meaning to transform (it is the root of our English word, metamorphosis).

In Christian terms we can only ‘morph’ or change spiritually when the power of the Holy Spirit is in us and is working through us. A lovely quote from the book says,

‘When morphing happens, I don’t just do the things Jesus would have done; I find myself *wanting* to do them. I don’t just go around trying to do right things; I *become* the right person.’ (*‘TLYAW’ page 21*)

Change is inevitable if we are to be spiritually alive; we should not only expect change but should seek to change. I am going to naively assume that every one of us wants to change to become more like Jesus.

Chat Time

Turn to the person next to you and share your answer to this question, “If there was one aspect of your spiritual life you’d like change in, what would it be?”

2. Training versus Trying

When I was away at Spring Harvest last week I was reminded of the story of a man called Chesley Sullenberger. Does anyone know who he is?

You would all have known who was last year. On January 15th 2009 he was the pilot of an Airbus 320 passenger plane whose two engines were wiped out by what was thought to be a “bird strike” a few minutes after it took off from La Guardia airport in New York. He didn’t panic but brought the plane (and it’s 150+ passengers) safely down on the Hudson river saving their lives.

When he was interviewed on American TV he said, “It wasn’t a miracle. I just relied on my instincts – which have been forged over many years by habits and skills.”

Habits and skills. We can *try* to change on our own, we can *try* to change by actively asking for God’s help. We may succeed but more often than not we will fail. The best resource for changing and growing in our spiritual life is not *trying* but *training*.

How do you think Amy Williams won Britain's first solo Winter Olympics gold medal for 30 years in Vancouver this year? Not by trying but by training very hard so that her performance on the track came naturally out of habit and instinct.

Spiritual transformation is not a matter of trying harder but training wisely. This is what the apostle Paul means when he writes to his young friend Timothy. He says, ‘train yourself in godliness’ (1 Timothy 4:7). In other words, ‘Don’t just try hard Timothy, don’t think you can lead a church and minister by chance. Put in some effort and train; work hard to get some good habits which in time will then come naturally.’

I think that the next six weeks can be very exciting and bear fruit for us. We don’t need to ‘try hard’ but be open to learn some simple skills (or spiritual disciplines) which we can practice so that they eventually become habits.

The more we develop good habits the more we’ll find we are morphing, changing, transforming into the people of God that Jesus wants us to be.

John Ortberg says some very sensible things about training :

Wise training respects the freedom of the Spirit. We can open ourselves up to transformation but we can’t force it. God’s Spirit is the person who will do the transforming.

Wise training respects our unique temperament and gifts. Each of us is unique; C.S. Lewis once came to the conclusion that every person is created to see a different facet of God's beauty – something that no-one else can see in quite the same way – and then to bless other people by sharing that aspect of God which they would otherwise have missed.

We change not to become like people we think are better Christians than us but to become like our Lord Jesus.

Wise training will take into account our season of life. Whatever our season of life is (youth, new parenthood, busy work-life, retirement) we can offer it to God and make the most of each opportunity and challenge for spiritual growth.

Wise training respects the inevitability of peaks and troughs. Our lives have high times and low times. There will be times when we see great growth because we have spent a lot of time in prayer and service. Other times we'll find prayer and service very hard – perhaps that's when we may need to rest.

Wise training begins with a clear decision. Athletes don't drift into a life of training – they make a decision and go for it. They don't get fit overnight but they commit themselves to a regime of training that will see them one day reach where they want to be.

Conclusion

We often talk about the apostle Paul's dramatic conversion but perhaps forget that it took three years of training and practice before he came to Jerusalem to meet Peter and James and set off on his missionary journeys. Transformation didn't happen overnight.

And remember that it took the disciples time before they became the amazing people we read about in Acts. In this morning's reading the disciples didn't realise at first who Jesus was – even though this was

the third time Jesus appeared to them! It took time and training and an openness to change.

So please stick with me on this journey of transformation – next week we'll be looking at joy in our lives and the need to immerse ourselves in a culture of celebration.