

RE-DIGGING OLD WELLS

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Genesis 26: 18 "Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham; for the Philistines had stopped them up after the death of Abraham; and he gave them the names that his father had given them".

The situation here is quite straight-forward. With a supply of fresh water desert tribes are rich, without it they cannot survive. So when Isaac and his family returned to the old places where his father Abraham had lived, their first concern was the rediscovery of the wells which Abraham had dug and which the Philistines had in the meantime filled in.

Put yourself in Isaac's place. He has a practical and urgent need of water. But more than that the good work, which his father has done, has been destroyed. He feels the hurt personally. He digs again the wells that his father has dug, and he calls them by the same names which his father had given them.

This morning I want to suggest that this desire to go back and recover something old and good that has been lost has relevance for us in our lives. Of course anyone who wants to live in the past is making a fatal error. Life changes and we must change with it. The maths I learnt at school would be quite useless now for my children. Some of the science would simply be wrong. Working life is not the same as it was. I was at a meeting with a prospective new minister at a Church last week and someone asked "Are you computer literate". They never used to ask that! Anyone who isn't willing to change becomes obsolete and irrelevant. But real progress is not simply a matter of creating something new - it also involves a holding onto of what was best in the past. If there are new gains to be made- there are often old gains which need to be recovered.

Here is Isaac. He did not simply repeat what went before. He has tasks to carry out which his father never had. But he had Abraham for his father and was not ashamed of it. He did not live merely on this narrow neck of land that we call the present. He found something that his father had done that had been destroyed by the Philistines. So he dug again the wells his father had dug. This is not just an ancient story. Look around you and see. Perhaps we too must dig again the wells which the Philistines have filled up.

Firstly perhaps let's apply this in our personal lives. In life we frequently face new challenges and new situations but do we not sometimes also need to rediscover something we once had but now have lost? Most of us have had this experience. Life races on in restless busy activity and then suddenly comes a pause. It may be that illness or a holiday gives us the opportunity to relax and reflect on our lives. It may be a piece of music brings back memories of the past. Then we recall the way we were and we see that something has been lost, something which ought never to have been lost.

If we could go back and meet the person that we were, what would they make of us as we are? How many young people start out with ideals and then lose them somewhere along the way? How many marriages begin in love and end in monotony? How many people drift into something which actually they would never have chosen?

Sometimes the way forward for our lives is not so much going on to something new, as going back to something old we ought never to have lost. I do not know what wells of living water the Philistines in Sutton have been trying to fill up in your lives but I know that not one of us can fail in some degree to share his universal experience. We all need to be called back to things that we have lost.

Secondly this applies not only to personal character but also to personal religion. If religion is a living faith it has to change. We are not living in the world our ancestors knew. We are in a time of deep and profound change and one thing that's clear to me is that as a church here at Trinity we are only at the beginning of the kind of changes that we have to make if we're going to be in a future a much stronger church than we are now. Of course those of you who've been here many years will know that this church has already changed and is changing.

Leonora McCroft once she suggested to someone at Westminster Central Hall, where she then worshipped, that she should transfer her membership to Trinity which was closer to where she lived, only to get the reply "Oh you don't want to go there – all those ladies in fur coats". How true was it then? I don't know, but it's certainly not true now.

Already this is a changing church. Less formal. More socially and racially inclusive. But still we're only on the edge of the kind of changes we need. For that reason the education committee is beginning to work on a programme called Trinity 20/20 that will try to look to and shape our future. So we're looking to the future. But whatever that future is there are some things that have not to change.

It takes the profound experiences of vital religion to make a genuine Christian. And they are not new. They are old. They were in Jesus and Paul Wesley. Maybe there were there in your parents and their parents before them. They were certainly in the old Trinity of 30 years ago and we need them now.

Prayer for example is not new. The understanding that the cope with the challenge of life you need an inner life - that is not new. On one occasion Jesus went away to pray and when he came back the effect on him was so obvious that his disciples asked, "Lord teach us to pray". If we've lost that we'd better go back and recover it.

Or take belief in God itself. Of course many of the beliefs we have about God and the ways we worship God change. How we see God working in the world would certainly be differently from the way people understood 100 years ago. But the inner experience of God is not difference. The sense of wonder that breaks in on you when you find yourself in the presence of the holy is not new. The experience of a still small voice whispering in the quiet of our lives is not new. The inner fire when the spirit floods into a life is not new. These are old wells which nourished our ancestors. And if we do not re-dig them and keep them clear then no matter how modern our faith it will inevitably be futile.

And then thirdly let us make our final application of this to our social life. Take for example the current crisis in family life. Family life is changing rapidly and certainly there is no pattern of family life that is there for all time. But whatever pattern of family life there's something we have to be sure we've not lost touch with. A man and a woman loving each other so much they want to spend the rest of their lives together and giving their children the security in which to grow. That's an old tradition. In Genesis 24 we come across the following short simple sentence. "Isaac took Rebecca, and she became his wife, and he loved her".

That's 3000 years ago from a world from a world with a very different idea of family life from anything we would want but which of us doesn't understand what it means. In our reading we heard how to try to protect Rebecca Isaac pretends she is his sister and not his wife. But he pretence breaks down when Abimelech the Philistine king looked down from his window and saw Isaac and his wife Rebecca in a loving embrace, looking at each other with loving eyes and laughing together, and knew this was no brother and sister. There's nothing modern about the deep commitment that two people can have for each other.

Today modern family life will not be a simple recreation of what the family was like in the past. The equality that a woman expects is quite different from the old dependency. The old way that many fathers were hardly involved with their children is certainly not something to turn back to. At least I mostly think so.

But if the shape of marriage can change and evolve there's something we have not to lose. The family is where we learn who we are, where we come from, and where we belong. The family is where we learn fidelity, loyalty, responsibility, compassion, and honesty. A family is where we love and are loved. What alternative is there which can give us that?

Look what the family can do for children. My sister teaches in what according to the results table the 7th worst primary school in the country. I like to tell her it's the only place she can get a job. Actually it's not the 7th worst in the country at all. It's a very good school. It happens to be trying to teach very many deeply disturbed children. Why are they deeply disturbed? One of the answers is quite simple. Hardly any of them have what we would call a stable loving family background. Can anything really matter to a child as much as that? Any of you who been married in this Church may remember the phrase in the wedding service. "God has provided it for the birth and the nurture of children, so they find the security of love and grow up in the heritage of faith". Today in our relationships we need not simply something new but also something very old: deep committed loving partnerships, the joy of lasting loving, genuine devotion to family life and to the care of children - old wells to dig again.

I do not want to live in the past. I want to look towards the future. But some values do not go out of fashion. Some of the old wells are parents drank from are just as life giving today. God forbid we should let the Philistines stop them up and keep us from them.

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