

Quinquagesima Sunday
Psalm 31:1, 2b-3,5, 9, 16

If it ain't broke, don't fix it! So the saying goes. And it does make sense, does it not, that if something works well, there is no need to change it.

Except that to many in our day and age *change* has become an end in itself rather than merely a means to an end. To call for *change* is the cool thing to do; it shows that you can think independently when you parrot what it is fashionable to say: that *tradition* is bad and *change* is good.

If it ain't broke, don't fix it! That is just common sense. But when change becomes an end in itself, common sense goes out the window; it usually does, when fashion takes over. Obviously not all change is good; what Christian can think of the cultural changes of recent years and think that all change is good?

If it ain't broke, don't fix it! Well, whether something works or not, that would depend on what it is for, would it not? A hedge clipper is not very useful for shaving; but that does not mean that the hedge clipper is broken, only that it is meant for something else. Whether or not the Church works or needs fixing, that would depend on what one thinks that she is for, and who one believes God is, and whether or not one believes in God to begin with.

Some years ago a book came out entitled: *Why Christianity must change or die*. Essentially it was a call for the Church to abandon the Christian faith. The Church lives among unbelievers, the book said, and this was supposedly a completely new situation; and so Christianity had to be changed, so that unbelievers could be Christian without becoming Christian and having to cease to be unbelievers.

As obviously absurd as this idea is, it is quite common to hear Christians say that the Church must *change or die*; as if our Lord Jesus had not given His promise that the gates of Hell shall not prevail over His Church; as if He were not to be trusted; as if there were no God. Well, what God Himself says to this is: *As the rain and the snow come down from Heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in that for which I sent it.* His Word is not broken. His Word will always work faith and salvation in all who can be saved. And He knows His own particular purposes, for this congregation, and everyone in it, as well as for everyone outside of it.

His Word is not broken; to try to fix it would be sinful arrogance. And it would also be to break things, rather than to fix them. He is God; we are not.

Be to me a rock of refuge, we pray in the Introit today, a strong fortress to save me! And right after that we confess that God is that already, and that that is the very reason why we ask Him to be that: For You are my Rock and my Fortress.

But why ask God to be what He already is? If it ain't broke, why fix it? Well, maintenance is different; maintenance is, well, maintenance. *God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people, says our Catechism; but we pray in this petition that God would lead us to realise this, and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving.* Therefore we ask God for what we already trust Him to give, and to have given already: in order to remember that He is the Giver of all things good, and receive His gifts with thankfulness.

Be to me a rock of refuge, we pray today, a strong fortress to save me! For You are my Rock and my Fortress; and for Your name's sake You lead me and guide me. This way we pray, not only today, and not only in this particular Psalm; in fact, our faith, and our life with God, in so far as it is life with Him, is all what He Himself works in us. *For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, writes the holy Apostle Paul, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.*

We seek our refuge in God because He already is our refuge. We seek our salvation in Him because He has already assured us of His salvation. When we become aware that we have sinned, and whenever we are reminded that we not only constantly sin, but are, in fact, sinners by nature, we seek His mercy and forgiveness for our sin exactly because we know from His own Word that our sin is dealt with and done away with already, and as such we also know that when we seek forgiveness for our sin, we will not do so in vain; that *if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Similarly when we pray: *In You, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame; in Your righteousness deliver me!* We appeal to His own righteousness, not only because we have none of our own, but also because we know that He who alone is righteous will not break His promise, but be *faithful and just so as to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

And to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness is exactly what He has not only promised to do, but also already done, once and for all.

Christ loved the Church and gave Himself up for her, as He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the Word. We have been baptised into His name, which means that we have been baptised into Himself and His salvation.

And so, immediately after we have pleaded with Him to deliver us, we confess: Into Your hand I commit my spirit; You have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God.

As we make this confession, how can we forget that He has Himself spoken those words: Into Your hand I commit my spirit!; that the Son of God spoke those words from His cross when all was finished, when His sufferings were fulfilled, the price and penalty paid for the sin of all sinners, in full and in abundance, with His sufferings, so that He who was abandoned by the Father's love in order that we might never be abandoned, could finally once again commend Himself to the love of the Father, and die under His blessing?

To this the prayer points forward, which God gave to His people, in Holy Scripture: that in time He would make this prayer His own.

*He would make Himself one with us in all our distress, and in our death. He would live for us and with us a lifetime in this world of suffering and sorrow. And He would die for us, into the eternal death we have earned with our sin, with the evil and ungodliness and impurity that is in our lives, and in our hearts. For this He would have Himself made one with us in our sin, baptised with the Baptism of sinners, into us and all that is ours, in order to have us baptised into Him and all that is His, His righteousness, that is: His goodness and innocence before God, and His eternal life. He became Himself *Immanuel*, God with Us, that is: God as our Saviour, and God as our salvation.*

Therefore we seek our salvation in Him: because He has already made Himself to be our salvation, and made us to believe and know in faith that He is that. By this love is perfected with us, as He has had His holy Apostle John write it: that we have confidence with regards to the day of judgement. Therefore we pray: In You, O Lord, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame: because He Himself works it in us to know it faith, by His love.

And therefore we pray, in whatever distress we might find ourselves, as we live in this world of suffering and sorrow, and of sin, our own and that of others: Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am in distress; my eye is wasted from grief; my soul and my body also. Make Your face to shine upon Your servant; save me in Your steadfast love!

Because we know that His love is *steadfast* love; not a passing thing, like our love so often is, but rather the *covenant* love by which He has bound Himself to us, and us to Him, with His promise, in His Baptism, and in His festive meal of salvation, in which He gives His own body and blood to us to eat and drink, and thus makes us one with Him anew, and gives to us anew the salvation He has already given to us, once and for all, fully and for real.

Make Your face to shine upon Your servant, we pray; save me in Your steadfast love!; because we know that His love is *steadfast* love, and because we know that already in days of old He commanded this blessing to be spoken upon His people, as the culmination of worship: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace.* And we know that the blessing He commanded to be spoken upon His people is *not* an empty word; it will not return to Him empty, but rather accomplish that which He purposes, and succeed in that for which He sent it. As He said it, when He commanded that His priests pronounce the blessing upon His people: *Thus they shall put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them.* His Word of blessing would actually put His name upon the people. And His Word of blessing is His Word of *salvation*; for for the Lord to make His face to shine upon us and be gracious unto us and grant us His peace, that *is* salvation; it is ultimate deliverance from all suffering and sorrow, even from sin, and from death, unto eternal life in His glory. And His Word of salvation is a *living* Word which saves all that can be saved. When He looks to us in love and makes His love to shine upon us, His love will also shine *into* us and overcome death and darkness in us and work that love in us for Him which is *faith*, so that we trust in Him and surrender to His love. His Word of blessing is a Word which actually puts His name upon us, for real, just like the promise by which He has sinners baptised actually makes us to be born anew into His name, and placed into and included in His very own reality, in that eternal love which was and is forever between the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

With His Word He gives Himself to us, in all His fullness, who has already given Himself to us, in all His fullness, He whose goodness is a fountain ever flowing, ever increasing, and the fullness of love and life and all things good.

O Christ our God, Lamb of God, who have borne, and take away, the sin of the world, have mercy upon us. *Amen.*