

New from old

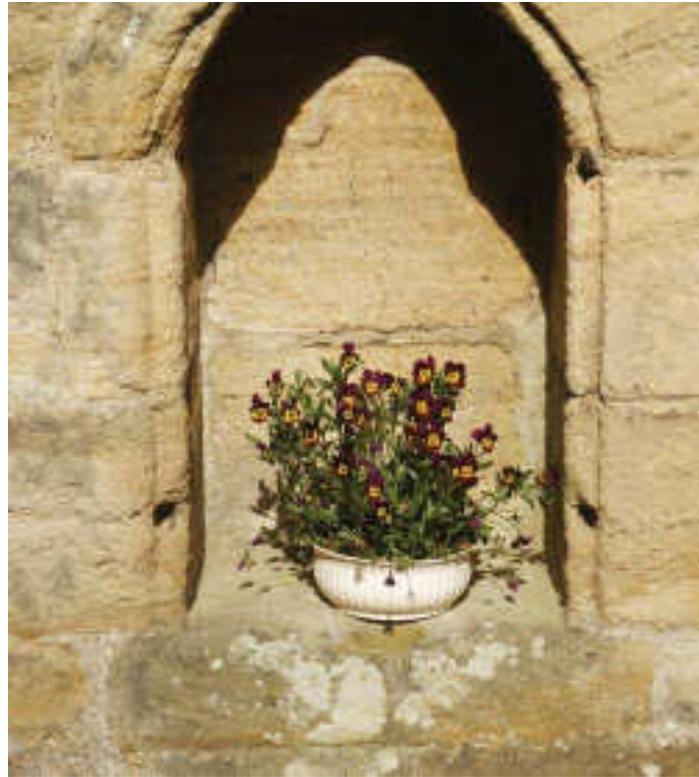
The way the Bible describes radical change, both in individual human lives and in communities, is important within Bible study traditions. The words used in the original languages carry deep meaning about what is involved in the process of change and what happens to people during that process.

Quite a lot of that is often lost in translation. Usually what is being talked about is conversion, couched in terms of repentance, penitence, and coming back to God. What happens to a person or a community involved in such a change of life? Driven by faith, there is a turning round, with the implication of movement, re-orientation or re-thinking and a whole new way of seeing things. In describing this process to us, scripture uses words which indicate something which is both dynamic and deeply transforming. At the heart of conversion, or making a life right, is the acceptance of the need for change, to make a judgement about, or make peace with the past, seek forgiveness, leave behind what is over and start afresh.

Some people assume from reading scripture that God controls everything about this process, – a bit like waving a magic wand, so that transformations happen which take people from bad places to good places instantaneously. But if we look closely, the healing miracles and the forgiveness of Jesus don't work like that. There are various important elements embedded in such radical change.

The first element is self awareness that something really is wrong. Many people get stuck in a rut because they get used to life being wrong; they don't really realise that something different, or more, is possible. The Bible indicates that God begins the process by calling every human person through the action of the Holy Spirit. It is often that quiet call that prompts people to start self reflection and to realise that the chance to change is before them. It won't necessarily be easy, pleasant or without consequences; the turning around that such change implies can take you away from what is comfortable or what you are used to. Some people bury their heads in the sand, go deaf, or make a run for it. Look at Jonah, says Jesus.

The next element is the will to change. Jesus asks the sick man at the pool of Bethesda, 'do you want to recover?'
The man



blames everyone else for his condition; he won't, until Jesus challenges him, make up his mind that he really wants to change. This is why the rich young man has to go away, – he claims he is ready for change, but when put to the test, he discovers he is not (perhaps) prepared to change. He didn't expect the upheaval that change challenged him with.

The final element is that there has to be a surrender to God in faith that allows the change to happen. We see that in the case of Zacchaeus, letting Jesus into his heart and home, repenting of his past life and making reparations to the poor. This part of the process involves risk, in the radical remaking of self that God can and will make possible. It does not mean that life will be perfect, happy and without hardship. It does mean that we are free to live life in all its fullness and equipped to be citizens of heaven. It is nothing less, Jesus explains to Nicodemus, than a form of rebirth, a remaking of self that starts us again refocused on God. Such transformation changes spiritual priorities, questions our journey, refocuses the view and reorients our spiritual selves and our lives. ■

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