



## **Consistency isn't all it's cracked up to be** **Rev Richard Bonifant**

Year C, Epiphany 3

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10, Luke 4:14-21

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I have been really fortunate in the last few weeks to have had some downtime during which I got a lot of work done on the thesis I am hoping to submit later this year. I am not going to talk about the specific work I've been doing, that will happen at some point, but not today. What I will say is that the focus of my research has been the ways we often overcomplicate religious ideas in a way that can be disabling to many parts of our lives. One doesn't need to get too far into any introductory book on psychology to realise that humans have a vast skillset when it comes to self-deception. And if you don't believe me about that, you've just proven my point. (Just so you know, I was feeling quite pleased with myself when I wrote that last sentence, so I hope it comes across as light hearted rather than patronising).

A quick example of the kind of thing I'm talking about. There is a psychological effect known as Consistency Bias. What consistency bias suggests is that we typically think that we are aware of the ways our opinions and ideas have changed over the course of our lives. The reality, however, is that unless you are an extremely introspective person who constantly tracks their progress through life, most of the time you'll assume that how you think or feel about something right now, is how you've always thought or felt about that thing. Our bias leans towards the idea that we are consistent, and doesn't support an awareness that we actually change our opinions far more frequently than we think we do.

In the church we can see how this has occurred on issues such as empowering women to become priests and bishops. Some of those who were opposed when such debates took place now believe that they were not opposed at all, because time, society, the church, and those people themselves have moved from opposition to support. Let's face it, no one likes being on the wrong side of history.

So why, in the context of our readings this morning, have I chosen to tell you about consistency bias? The reason is because consistency bias is not only something experienced by us as individuals, it can be experienced by entire groups, communities and organisations. And in this, the church is far from exempt. Deep in our psychology is the idea that if something remains the same over time it is somehow more valuable than something that has changed. Now you may hear that and think, but I do value change. Like Socrates I affirm that the unexamined life is not worth living. Growth and change are what life is all about. And yes, I hope lots of you feel that way.

However, psychology has a habit of pointing out that as a species we are complicated. We have evolved to have all sorts of biases and defence mechanisms. These patterns of thinking are typically useful in a time of crisis, but are not necessarily helpful when trying to grow and change. Things like consistency bias can get in the way and inhibit our understanding of ourselves and our world. If we elevate consistency to the point of being a virtue, we have made it harder for ourselves when it comes to making any kind of change.

One of the great church developments of last century was the liturgical reform movement, where people began exploring why we hold services of worship the way we do? The reasons for this movement are many and varied, but some key themes included having services of worship that people actually want to come to, and also having a deeper and better understanding of Christian worship as it has been practiced throughout history. The latter may surprise you, but in reality, Christian worship changed in all sorts of strange and interesting ways through the centuries. That was something of a new and shocking idea in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In the same way that scholars have noted that the greatest discovery in New Testament studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was that Jesus was Jewish, they were also surprised to discover that worship in the early church was very different to Christian worship nearly 2000 years later.

It's this particular point, regarding the realisation that worship in the early church was not well understood, that drove

a desire to get back to basics, to try and recapture some kind of imagined early church worship style. And I do say imagined because for the most part we have very little material that describes what worship was like in those first few centuries of Christian development. Now I'm not going to break down all the various texts that informed this process, other than to say that the few pieces of writing that spoke about worship dating from the first to the third centuries were not the only material that drew the church's attention. Old Testament passages concerning Jewish worship practices were also considered, given that this was the religion that Christianity developed from.

Hopefully in briefly describing that process you can glimpse an unacknowledged bias that suggested that styles of worship that were more consistent with ancient forms of worship are better than styles of worship that have evolved from those older traditions.

This morning we read a passage from the book of Nehemiah. And I've printed that passage at the back of today's service book if you'd like to take another look at it. This is one of the few biblical passages that describes an act of worship. In it we see that people were gathered together. Scripture was read, and I'm relieved to see it was also interpreted so that people would understand what had been read. Prayers were then offered. And finally, the people were sent out with the instruction to feast and to prepare enough food that they could offer some to those in need. It's a pattern of worship that feels very familiar. We gather together. We read scripture. Someone unpacks the readings, well sometimes we unpack the readings. Then we respond in prayer before being sent back into the world with an awareness of those in need.

Now our present day familiarity with this pattern in worship does not mean that Christians have always worshipped this way, because we have not.

But it does show that the efforts of those in the liturgical movement who wanted to create forms of worship that were more consistent with ancient forms of worship were highly successful. This pattern of gathering, reading and interpreting

scripture, praying and sending into the world can be found in the vast majority of mainline church worship services today. And on the face of it that feels good. Hooray for consistency. Except, in our eagerness to get back to basics, we may have thrown out a number of babies with the bathwater. Because let's face it, despite all the streamlining of services of worship over the last century, fewer people attend church with each passing day.

It's with that reality in mind that I want to ask some questions. What if we were to intentionally relax our desire for consistency? What if we began to affirm that in Christian history unity has not always been expressed as uniformity? Could it be that in our effort to find a singular right way of worshipping as Christians, that we have starved ourselves of different ideas and expressions that actually nourish many of us?

One of the scandalous claims at the heart of Christianity is that God is free to act in new and extraordinary ways. A close reading of the bible actually suggests that God is stunningly inconsistent. That claim is present in the audacious belief that God chose to become human in the person of Jesus. The God who is present in Christ is a God who is prepared to try new and surprising things. And yet, I'm not sure that we are that open to being surprised by God. We prefer to bind up the ethereal into easily understood ideas, rather than simply being open to the wildness of God. We favour consistency and predictability over change, renewal, and discovery. When Jesus dared to suggest that upon reading from the prophecy of Isaiah that he was the fulfilment of that prophecy, he was offering a radical new interpretation that suggested that God was doing something new in the world. God is always doing something new in the world. Is it time for us to do something new as well?