Readings: Isaiah 58.8-12; 1 Corinthians 2.1-12; Matthew 5.13-20

I’m going to tell you the two most evocative words in rhetoric, the two words that orators crave and cultivate, the two words that, used in the right way, have the most powerful effect on almost any listener. They’re two words that each contain dynamite in just one syllable, because each of them in a few letters conjures up a narrative, paints a vision, summons up backing music and billowing clouds and stirred hearts. But they’re two words that tell almost completely different stories.

The first word is, ‘new.’ The word ‘new’ is the most important word in advertising. In just three letters lies the promise of leaving behind the shabby, the clumsy, the broken, the embarrassing, the dull, the feeble – in short, the old. New is all about beginning, about possibility, freshness, birth. The second word is very different. It’s the word ‘again.’ ‘Again’ is about return, restoration, rhythm, revisiting, bringing back to life. It’s about a second chance, about renewal, regeneration, an opportunity to see the familiar and the tarnished in a deeper, richer way. It’s about coming home.

These two words shape the ways Christians talk about what they believe. ‘New’ is the word we use for creation. It has excitement, wonder, creativity, delight, discovery, mystery. ‘Again’ is the word we use for salvation. It has relief, forgiveness, tears, joy, reconciliation, trust, wisdom, mercy. ‘New’ is about birth; ‘again’ is about new birth – resurrection.

And the word we use for the place where ‘new’ and ‘again’ meet is ‘Jesus.’ Jesus is Israel again, the replaying of Israel’s story with God except with a different ending this time, the chance to set right all that was wrong, to unravel injustice and restore trust and breathe life into dry bones. But Jesus is also creation made new, a new beginning, the birth of what was always meant to be, a transformation of what’s possible. When people come to faith it’s sometimes about discovering the new, and it’s sometimes more about restoring the old, about finding faith again. I wonder which of new or again is where you are right now. I wonder which is what you need right now.

What I want to point out this morning is that ‘new’ and ‘again’ also describe the two main understandings of what we’re doing in education, of why we insist people go to school, of why visionaries in the seventeenth century founded two remarkable schools, Archbishop Tenison’s and St Martin-in-the-Fields High, whose achievements and dedication we’re proud to celebrate today. On the one hand education is about the new. It’s about drinking in knowledge, information, facts and skills about the way a baby is conceived, a sonnet is structured, a verb conjugates, or a quadratic equation plays out. It’s about equipping students who will spend most of their lives working with technology that hasn’t been invented yet, in a world of new challenges, new possibilities, and new ideas. But at the same time there’s something more subtle going on in assembly hall and playground and games field and music room. Children and young adults are being introduced to the profound wrongs in the world, and are being guided and supported in finding resources in their communities, in their faith, and in themselves to heal, to mend, to confront and to restore those people and those troubles and those injustices that keep us in prison. To put things right again.

The prophet Isaiah knows all about the power of those two words, ‘new’ and ‘again.’ In the later chapters of his book, Isaiah is writing after Judah’s return from exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC. Isaiah portrays the new society made possible after this amazing change in fortunes. How much will be genuinely new, and how much will be the restoration and resurrection of what was
there before the 50 years of exile? In today’s reading Isaiah anticipates how people in days to come will remember his generation. ‘Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to live in.’ I want you to focus your thoughts on that resonant phrase, ‘the repairer of the breach.’ Isaiah is saying, ‘You will be remembered because you looked devastation and failure and ruin squarely in the face and piece by piece you restored the ligaments, the muscles, the joints, the membranes that hold society together. You didn’t build, and achieve, and create: this isn’t about new; this is about again. New is good, exciting, exhilarating; but again is harder, more hidden, more subtle, more challenging.’

‘The repairer of the breach.’ Let’s look at that phrase philosophically and practically. Philosophically, life is much more about repairing than making. If you look at the Coliseum, the great stadium in ancient Rome, and see its dilapidated appearance, it may look like a symbol of the fall of a once-glorious empire. But in fact most of the stones were taken away to make other buildings in the city. And that’s how most things are created: they’re made out of the remnants of previous things. When we make a new friendship, it feels new, but in fact much of what we’re bringing to it is our experience of previous friendships, both good memories and bad ones. When we make a dress or a pair of trousers, it looks new, but in fact it’s made up of remnants of other things. Whenever we throw something away it goes back into the earth and sooner or later will reappear as a raw material for something we want to call new. And look at our professions. Doctors don’t make things: they repair people. Lawyers don’t make things; they mostly step in when things have gone wrong. Engineers make things: but most of the things they make are joining together two things that have got separated. They all spend their time repairing the breach.

‘Repairer of the breach’ is such a resonant way of talking about our calling as human beings that Jews have started using it as a description of what it means to be a Jew in the world today. The phrase tikkun olam means exactly that. When you dwell on the phrase, ‘repairer of the breach,’ I wonder what it makes you think of. I wonder if it’s a breach between nations or populations, or between peoples and the planet; or maybe it’s a breach between parts of an organisation or family; or perhaps between a person and God; or between you and someone you find it hard to love. Isn’t this the education that matters most of all? There was a time when education was about identifying people of talent and lifting them out of their home environments and getting them up, out and away into the fresh air of knowledge and discovery, and quite possibly making it impossible for them ever to go back. But isn’t the most important education that which equips us to repair the breach, to be agents of community that are able to be present, restore relationships, encourage, inspire, empower, reconcile, and bring to bear all the positive resonances of that word ‘again’? Wouldn’t that be the greatest achievement of Tenison’s and St Martin’s High School, that they be known far and wide as communities that raised up people who would be called ‘repairers of the breach’?

Let’s think together about what the curriculum for making people equipped to repair the breach might look like. What qualities and skills and disciplines do we need to be people who repair the breach?

If we follow Isaiah’s lead we start by weaning ourselves off the notion that breaches can simply be ‘fixed.’ A suffering society is a diseased body that needs healing, not a broken gadget that needs fixing. Our curriculum is based on learning what it means to heal – to forgive, to be reconciled, to repent, to befriend, to forge a shared story together. We’re not in the business of finding a target to blame, of cutting out a cancerous person and ostracising them, of scapegoating and labelling and ejecting and rejecting; we’re about working together on issues and discovering complementary gifts.

Next, we learn what it means to build networks of trust. In a school, once you’ve shared a classroom, played on a team, sung in a choir, been on a trip, you’ve got literally hundreds of people you at least slightly know. Repairing the breach is about cherishing such relationships and treating
them like cords on a rope bridge, interwoven with delicacy and skill, until the moment they need to bear some weight and every single cord is put under pressure and made to do some serious work. If a person is to come back into society after committing a terrible crime, if a family is to be integrated into a neighbourhood having fled from horror and war in a distant land, if a person with profound developmental disabilities is going to become a living, vibrant resident of a housing estate then all the ropes of the bridge are going to be stretched and tested. Education is about making citizens who know how to make such bridges and have the courage to walk with people across them.

Finally, the experience of being taken seriously, of having one’s gifts noticed, nurtured, refined, stretched, and celebrated should make us people who want to do the same with and for others. The root of the word educate is ‘to lead out.’ In a dysfunctional family, neighbourhood, or society, enormous energies are pent up and ignored and stifled, and never led out by anybody. Repairing the breach means making bridges and forming channels through which people can express the glorious diversity of gifts they’ve been given, and leading these gifts out in a wonderful human chain of discovery and abundance. There’s nothing more exciting than watching a person who’s been told for years they’re useless find that in fact they have gifts to offer that a community desperately needs and values.

That’s what repairing the breach means for education today. Learning to heal, building trust, and releasing gifts. Just what Jesus taught the disciples to do in Galilee. Just what Isaiah wanted his people to learn on their return from exile. Just what our society needs today. We’re here today to worship Jesus Christ, who repaired the breach, the breach between us and God and between us and one another. We’re here to celebrate the life of Tenison’s and St Martin’s Schools. My prayer is that people in future generations will look back on us, and see our work and our life together, and say, ‘We call them repairers of the breach.’