

Sermon for Advent II

The Values of the Kingdom

In the name..

Last week we began an Advent exploration together of the meaning of the rule of God in our lives – the short hand for which is often called the Kingdom of God.

We are taking an opportunity, here in this Church and in these few minutes, to step outside the current madness of Christmas preparations and to think about the new world that the man Jesus was sent to bring and which He preached, lived and died to proclaim.

So last week we looked together at what it was Jesus was teaching when he spoke of the rule of God in our lives – and I suggested that the message He proclaimed was one of transformative power and grace.

The central message of Jesus – the reign of God – was proclaimed as something here and now and immediate - ‘Repent for the Kingdom of God is *close at hand*’.

The Kingdom of God isn’t meant to be some ethereal otherworldly future place or event that we have to wait patiently to be revealed. I talked last week about how much I dislike the imagery of the end of the world that is epitomised by the paintings of John Martin – with the terror and fear and destruction that such imaginings suggest. Our God is merciful and just – and above all love. I cannot for a moment imagine, nor do I wish to worship, any god whose actions would bring such suffering and fear.

So last week we began to explore how Jesus was proclaiming a new world – a world of which He saw Himself standing on the threshold of its appearing, and yet a world that is still to be fully revealed and made.

Jesus and His first century followers didn’t understand history and time in the way that you and I do- a linear flow of minutes, hours and days with past, present and future leading on. Jesus’ society was entirely without clocks and instead time and place were understood in an endless cycle of seasons and generations and the social relationships and networks that made up His community. Think Topov in ‘Fiddler on the Roof’ and that wonderful song – Sunrise, sunset, sunrise, sunset.

And there is something else the clip shows us that was also true for Jesus. Jesus’ teaching and life was lived in the context of a society in which each person knew themselves primarily in relation to other people – to the network of family, community, society, obligation and status that

surrounded them – that network of shared values, hopes and faith that wedding scene so beautifully evokes.

Jesus taught about the reign of God and the transformation of the world in parables and in actions that demonstrated a profound concern with the social relationships around Him. And given what He taught and did – it is hardly surprising that the religious and political leaders of His day quickly came to fear and hate Him.

The very idea of the reign of God that Jesus taught was explosive and revolutionary because within that new domain - Jesus demanded, God demands, justice and the breaking down of the barriers that oppress and restrict the lives and flourishing of the people.

The religious leaders of Jesus age were allowed to function and to run the Temple by the Roman authorities because they could generally guarantee the social order and the payment of taxes. The Sadduces, who controlled the Temple, and the Pharisees who policed the faith were able to define what was socially and religiously acceptable and so control the people, keeping them for the most part compliant and peaceful.

Jesus message was profoundly threatening to them – and it is not at all surprising that they quickly fell out with Him and sought to get Him out of the way.

Just think about some of the parables He taught and the kind of world He was suggesting – a world in which God turns the tables on the rich and powerful

In the parable of Dives and Lazarus it is the poor man, who lay in life at the gate of the rich who is welcomed into Abraham's bosom. The rich, because they are rich and complacent are placed in torment in Hades. (Luke 16:19-31)

In the story of the repentant tax collector in Luke 18 it is the weeping and sorrowful sinner who is accepted by God at the Temple and not the observant and righteous Pharisee with this shiny phylacteries and ostentatious piety.

But don't think for a moment that you and I are getting out of the way of Jesus vision. The parable of the workers in the vineyard – with the last workers being the same living wage as those who had toiled all day under the heat of the sun strikes across our own understandings of what is fair and exposes our meanness of heart and greed. Instead Jesus is making a statement about justice, the value of each individual person and the reign of God in which everyone is provided with enough to live and to flourish.

Jesus was consciously recasting the net of social relationships – bringing in the poor, the outcast and the outsider, making new rules and outcomes that threatened everything that supported the power and the stability not just the rulers of His age, who quickly learned to hate Him and to plot His removal but also our own assumptions and lives and ways.

Of course it is not just in His parables that Jesus taught how the reign of God was to be seen and built.

In His every action – in His words and His deeds Jesus lived another way of living and seeing that challenged barriers and broke down walls so that people could be restored to life and made whole.

The Gospels are rich in stories of how Jesus defied convention and expectation – they define a great deal of what Jesus said and did and for many of us they are some of the most memorable illustrations of His power and His grace – His love in action. But even the simple healing miracle could be a sign of the reign of God to challenge and to stir.

So when Jesus healed a leper the impact of that healing was much more than simply a return to health for an individual person. Being a leper wasn't just having an illness – it was a social experience that meant that the sufferer was cut off by their illness from all the usual social supports and joys and obligations of life. They had to literally live outside the city walls away from even their closest family and friends and never to approach another healthy person again. Being sick – ritually unclean – was not just being ill, it was a severing from every normal social contact and part of life, a form of living social death and isolation in a way we would struggle to imagine today.

So healing a person was not just about health – it was a return to community, to relationships and obligation – a resurrection to life for the healed and a sign of the Kingdom to those who saw it.

The healing of the woman with the haemorrhage is even more radical. The Gospels tell us that while heading to Jairus' house Jesus was approached by a woman who had been suffering from bleeding for 12 years, and that she touched Jesus' cloak (fringes of his garment) and was instantly healed. Jesus turned about and, when the woman came forward, said "Daughter, your faith has healed you, go in peace".

We can't possibly catch the outrageousness of that statement to those who heard Him say those words but it is there. Jesus is telling a woman, a woman soaked in blood, a social reject that something as simple as her

desire for healing has made her acceptable to God, without anything else needing to be done or paid.

Jesus is challenging the not just the rulers but all of us with our usual expectations and casual prejudice of who is in and who is out.

I've been struggling to find something as shocking – telling a paedophile that God loves them, and showing it by the welcome they are offered? – praying for the soul of Myra Hindley?

Tell me honestly you would not be shocked and surprised and worried?

What Jesus was doing was challenging the very assumptions on which His society was based – the authority of the religious leaders, the function and the working of the Law, the social networks that kept the rich in power and the poor under control.

We are living at a time when trust has been lost in almost every institution of government and power. Our politicians have proved themselves venial and corrupt, our bankers discredited for greed and stupidity; journalists – the supposed guardians of our freedoms are in the courts for their lack of simple human decency. We regularly hear the police criticised, even care workers are being accused of callous indifference and teachers are attacked and undermined in our schools. And of course the Church is not immune – with scandals over sexual abuse and internal fighting over women and sexuality that makes us look both absurdly out of touch and prejudiced.

But this isn't just about institutions - frankly, you and I – we collectively borrowed too much, thought we could have it all and then realised we couldn't pay for it. Our families are often a mess and the material selfishness of our culture is destroying the very planet we live on.

The message of Jesus is now and then – 'enough!'

The reign of God in our world and in our lives is to end this false way of living and to return us to an authentic life that has integrity and above all hope.

Advent is about that way of life – of the challenge that Jesus brings and the response we must offer to the reign of God in our lives.

Jesus in His words, in His actions and in His teaching parables invites us to make specific, concrete and daily choices in our lives that break with the way things have been done and to give a glimpse of another world – not simply a vision glorious of heaven beyond this world but a vision concrete in reality – the transformation of human history and life itself.

Advent is a reminder of that possibility – a world we build piece by piece – our actions and our lives not just witnessing to our love of God but creating the world in which His love is known.

Next week I am going to talk about the practical outworking of building that world. We are Christians – we are called to work for the reign of God and the transformation of our society. That action is both as simple and as demanding as it sounds. I would ask you to pray this week that this a task in which we might be found faithful

Amen.