

Sermon for Advent Sunday –

The Kingdom of God- Part 1

What is the Kingdom?

In the name...

There is a fantastic advert on the telly at the moment which made me roar with laughter when I first saw it. (show video or pics)

It shows a young man building an ark amidst scenes of panic and flight. He carefully crafts the boat, creates windows and seats and beds and even a gym all in wood. And then as the skies darken and the apocalypse approaches – he calmly sprays himself with Lynx antiperspirant. And they come, two by two – not the animals of Noah but young women – all gorgeous and all just for him. The Lynx product is labelled – Lynx 2012.

Most of us know that there is a lot of speculation around about a prediction that the world will end next year. It's based end of the Mayan Calendar on the 21st December 2012. There was that big block buster film from Hollywood in 2009 about this and I preached on it at the time.

In the current economic crisis the Occupy demonstrations are calling out for a new world – a new vision and a new hope. The mood of our time is sombre, and it's not surprising that some have given up on this world and are looking for its end and, hopefully, something else.

There is even an exhibition on at Tate Britain on the work of a Victorian Artist – John Martin – whose pictures are those of a Biblical judgement and end of time. Highly recommended by one of my conservative Evangelical fellow clergy – though not by me.

'But in those days, after that suffering the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven!'

So our Gospel reading is right on the button – with its dark foreboding and end time predictions! Fantastic!

Except of course that it doesn't seem to fit with what we might be wanting this morning as we are all pretty much wired up with Christmas preparations – Bing is playing in the shops, the cake was supposed to be made last Sunday and we have, usually, barely begun to sort out the card list and who is coming to dinner – the last thing we might think we need is doom and gloom and fantastical celestial events.

Well no – actually this is exactly what we need and this is not doom and gloom and the Gospel is not and never has been about frankly unbelievable fantastical celestial events. In the frantic business of the secular world, the holy season of Advent longing and preparation we begin today is a deliberate brake on the silliness of the weeks before Christmas and a call to awareness.

Advent is rich and complex and wonderful – and it is not about getting ready for Christmas – for the little baby Jesus and all that fluffy nonsense of donkies and Santa and stuffing. It is about the new world that the man Jesus was sent to bring and which He preached, lived and died to proclaim.

The Christian message has always had the answer to the often incoherent longing in our hearts - that knows that somehow this world is not as it is meant to be and that there must be another way. That way is the Kingdom of God – and it is at the heart of our faith and it is not about the end of the world and the hope of something better elsewhere but about a very practical and present reality and way of life.

Together we are going to spend the season of Advent thinking about what the Kingdom of God is – how its values challenge the world and how we might live faithfully both in this world and in the world we believe that Jesus and God wants to be.

Scholars and students of Jesus' teaching have long agreed that the idea of the Kingdom of God is at the very core of His teaching and ministry and life. Matthew, Luke and especially the Gospel of Mark talk about it constantly – and many of Jesus' parables make reference to it either directly or indirectly

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field Matthew 13:44

And again he said, 'To what should I compare the kingdom of God? It is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.' Luke 13:20-21

That it was an idea central to Jesus is not doubted – though some scholars have suggested that rather than a kingdom of God the idea that Jesus was trying to share is better captured by a phrase such as 'God's domain' – the place where God reigns, the place where God is to be found.

Just what Jesus meant by the place where God reigns has lead to lots of arguments and debate.

It's complicated – Jesus didn't give a location or a map of how to get there – instead He taught through parables and through His own action what it was like. He made things harder because at times He also spoke using imagery that our modern minds find fantastic and unbelievable - using words rich in the imagery of what is known as the apocalyptic tradition – a literary and theological idea that expected God to break into human history with rolling clouds, and legions of angels and fire and battle in heaven.

It is tough stuff and there is enough other end of the world stuff around to make us uncomfortable with this as the way that the reign of God is going to be brought about.

So some Christians have reacted against that language and rejected it. There are theologians and Biblical scholars who say that these words are entirely foreign to Jesus and something added later by the Gospel writers. For them – and there are many who still preach this today - the place where God reigns is simply and solely in the heart of the believer as a message of ethical love and peace.

So we study Jesus' words, we note His actions, we understand His teaching and through and in our own lives we follow Him. Our faith shapes us – and through our actions those around us but the reign of God is entirely within our lives.

Others, of course, go the other way and look constantly for the end of the world when God will break in and save His chosen few – the world and the rest going down in flames. In the meanwhile there is suffering and endurance and the hope of something better.

Neither seem particularly attractive ideas to me – the former is individualistic and fractured. It makes the inner life of the believer paramount and ultimately without influence beyond individual. It ignores our collective life and the call to community. The latter is a counsel of despair – suggesting that this world is so bad and corrupt that God can only destroy what He has made and start again.

And I dislike intensely any vision of God as willingly choosing to terrify people and to bring death and destruction, suffering and pain in the process. Any god who would do that is not a god I am willing to worship or love – indeed, is not a god who is worthy of worship and love.

Instead I would like to suggest – along with an increasing number of theologians another way – a way to see the reign of God in our lives that takes seriously what Jesus does when He calls us to be alert and awake and gives our moral choices and the quality of our Christian living both power

and an urgency that is powerful and transforming. A way of seeing God's domain as being both our inner home and our transforming outer mission.

We first have to understand something about Jesus and His age. Forgive me – this is a little complex. You and I see the world in a very different way to the way that Jesus and His contemporaries did. We see time as a line that moves from the past to the present to the future.

In first century Palestine, as in all ancient and pre-industrial societies, time is simply the present; the past and the future don't exist except as something linked to the here and now, an endlessly repeating cycle of seasons and lives and generations. Sunrise, sunset. Sunrise, sunset.

A good way of illustrating this would be that when the ancient Jews celebrated Passover, as Jesus did each year in Jerusalem – recalling something that they believed had happened two thousand years earlier it wasn't simply a memory or a history lesson – but an event in which they were actually sharing as they remembered it. It's still true today – Jewish faith teaches that Remembrance is about actually being present at the event recalled – and I have spoken before how that insight changes our understanding of Communion which is not simply a recalling of the Last Supper and the Passion but an active sharing in the actual event which is the centre of all time and space. As if we are actually there in reality and truth.

So when Jesus talks of the reign of God – whether He is talking in parable or using language of clouds and heavens He is talking about a depth of experience in this time rather than an event in some future time – a depth of experience that can only be conveyed by language that is stronger and richer in order to convey its power and meaning. So when Jesus says 'the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light and the stars will be falling from heaven!' He is not predicting the future but giving power to the events of the present.

Mark's Gospel summarises the message of Jesus as being one of simple urgency and clarity – 'repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.' This is not some future event – it is here and now and the new reign of God is drawing near. Jesus is not preaching the future but the values and the ways of behaviour that change the world from within and in the here and now. The kingdom of God is amongst us.

Put in contemporary terms – in the current age the vast majority live in dire poverty and war and consumption threaten the very survival of our planet. This seemingly unchangeable world will crumble and give way to a new age –

the age of the reign of God and it does so through the actions and responses that we make in our lives.

The kingdom of God – to go back to the phrase we started with is not some future place nor is it some personal mental or spiritual state. The kingdom of God is the breaking in of God's rule in the here and now through the actions and lives of those who love and follow the teachings of Jesus.

Our lives – shaped and formed by our faith – bring about the transformation of our world that we long to see in reality and in this time and place.

This Advent as we think about the Kingdom of God – and next week I am going to speak about the values of the new world that we are called to create – we do so in remembrance that the transformation of the world that we long to see is not something we wait to be given us by God either by external divine intervention or through some otherworldly inner peace. It is 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.

That is truly radical – we are saying that this world with all its terrible beauty is passing away – and that our actions are the way that it will be rebuilt as the place of justice, peace and love that Jesus proclaimed.

That is a tremendous responsibility – and a fantastic opportunity. This Advent let our lives be worthy of that call.

Amen