

Prayer

God beyond,

God beside,

God below,

We gather to meet you and
through your Spirit to encounter you
through your presence to know you
through your son to live your way.

Amid the news of this day, lift our hearts, bodies and voices in reverence.

Amid this city and church, lift our lives to love in your strength.

Amid our fears and doubts, entice faith from us.

Like a shepherd you never stop searching for us.

Your care anticipates our need.

Your grace anticipates our wilfulness.

Your forgiveness anticipates our falling.

All praise to you.

We confess the times we have tried to take your place and take control.

We confess the times we have mistrusted your good news.

We confess our failure to respond to people in need.

Surround us again with mercy

To live with you each day of our lives,

In Christ, we pray.

“Waiting for the New World” a sermon based on Matthew 25: 31-46 preached at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand by Kerry Enright on the Sunday of the Reign of Christ, 27 November 2017.

Last Wednesday our new Church Council met for the first time.

The first item to discuss was about God’s call on our church at this time. What is God calling us to be?

And the first part of that question involved – what does God’s world look like? How do we name what God is inviting us into? From that basic question comes our purpose and our identity.

This is the last Sunday of the Christian year, the day of the reign of Christ, the day of Christ the king. When Christ rules, what does the world look like? What do you and I do?

Which brings us to the gospel for today.

The refrain is repeated: “When was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison?”

A refrain repeated both by those who cared for people in need and those who did not care. When people cared for the stranger they did not realise they were caring for Jesus. When people ignored the stranger they did not realise they were ignoring Jesus.

Both groups were ignorant. Both groups were acting from their moral compass. Both were responding without realising what was really happening.

To the one people who gave food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty and clothing for the naked and care for the sick and visits for those in prison and welcome for the stranger, to those were said these words – “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

So here the kingdom is the realm for those who care for those in need. Here those who give food to the hungry inherit the realm of God. God’s world comes to those who respond to human need with compassion and care.

Last Sunday I quoted Thomas Merton. In his memoir the Seven Storey Mountain, Merton tells of encountering the poetry of William Blake and of being convicted of the “dead, selfish rationalism which had been freezing my mind and will.” Merton became convinced that “the only way to live was to live in a world that was charged with the presence and power of God.”

A world charged with the presence and power of God is a world where people act for those who are hungry and thirsty and naked and sick and in prison and a stranger.

That is how we can tell that it is the realm of God. It is a realm so different we name it as the realm of God, where God reigns, where God rules.

At the beginning of one of his books, Jacques Ellul spoke of that other world:

“I try to do here the same thing I do in all my books; face, alone, this world I live in, try to understand it, and confront it with another reality I live in ...”

People who experience the under-side of our world, long for a radically different realm. They long for more than an amended order or an improved economy or gradual evolution. They long for a radically different realm, where the stranger is welcomed, the hungry receive food, the thirsty receive drink and the prisoner receives freedom.

Yet that realm needs to break in on the world we know if it is to be more than utopia.

It needs to influence how we live in this world, this world of which Jesus said:

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

This other realm, this radically different way of being: food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, welcome for the stranger, must take hold of us in our everyday existence.

That is the gospel today.

Two worlds coexisting, constantly interacting, sometimes colliding.

And we are the actors in the drama.

On the evening of 22 November 1963, the British playwright David Lodge was watching one of his plays, a satire.

The audience chuckled when an actor in the play showed up for a job interview with a transistor radio clutched to his ear, demonstrating the character's indifference to what was happening. The actor set down the radio and turned to a station, so that the news, the music and commercials played in the background as the play continued.

That night, a voice came on the radio with a live news bulletin ... "Today, the American President John F Kennedy was assassinated ..."

The audience gasped and the actor immediately switched off the radio, but it was too late. The reality of the world outside had broken in on the world inside the theatre. The world in the theatre was completely changed by news of the world outside. And the drama people were watching became much less significant than the news that intruded.

The gospel today is about the realm of Christ exposing the truth of our world, the realm of Christ changing fundamentally how people live day by day by day.

When was it we saw you hungry? When did we give you something to drink?

The realm of God is a larger world that includes people we never imagined, we did not know. In a sense, it might be then that we want to speak of the commonwealth of God. Matthew 25 is about how we share the wealth we have in common. The kingdom of Matthew 25 is a common wealth.

Yet it is not created by human beings, nor achieved through human effort alone. It comes as an inheritance, a gift we receive from the hands of God.

The realm of God does not break in without conflict and struggle against the power of evil. The power of evil that turns decent people blind to need, resistant to strangers, unresponsive to people who are sick.

"For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil ..."

The realm of God is ruled by a God of light more powerful than the prince of darkness. A realm where attitudes, cultures, organisations, churches, people are shaped by the life of Jesus.

As said to the Ephesians:

This is the power at work among you, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion.

William James, a natural sceptic, studied people who sought to live in that world here and now. He concluded they were torchbearers.

“Like the single drops which sparkle in the sun as they are flung far ahead of the advancing edge of a wave-crest or a flood, they show the way and are forerunners. The world is not yet with them, so they often seem in the midst of the world’s affairs to be preposterous. Yet they are vivifiers and animaters of potentialities of goodness which but for them would lie forever dormant. It is not possible to be quite as mean as we naturally are, when they have passed before us.”

The reign of god, the rule of God, the realm of God, seen in this world said Jesus:

“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.”

This is the hope to which we are called.

This is the immeasurable greatness of the power of God for us who believe.



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