

Proclaim the kingdom of God

Sermon by the Revd Clive H Norton on 15th June 2008,
5th Sunday after Pentecost at St.Peter's Anglican Church, Cremorne
Readings: Exodus 19:2-8a; Psalm 116: 1-2,11-18; Romans 5:1-11;
Gospel: Matthew 9:35 -10:18

Prayer:

Spirit of God, renewing the face of the earth!
Spirit of God, filling the hearts of your people!
Spirit of God, raising the dead to new life!
Give us courage to say YES to the unknown future,
and commit our lives in service to others.

Every day because of the speed of modern technology, you and I are changed by pictures from space and from all over planet earth. There are a billion or more people for whom this is not true, for they do not have the technologies or cannot understand any language other than their tribal tongue. There are millions also who avoid being affected - or "infected" - by the new technologies by huddling together in cultural and religious groups that want to remain cut off from what is happening. These resist all changes that may cast doubt on what their ancestors and they believe to be "common sense" about the way to live. Typically they escape into concern for *individual salvation* and dogmas about the life after death: the joys of heaven for those who agree with them, and the furies of hell for those who do not. But, "nothing can resist the power of an idea whose time has come".

What Jesus foreshadowed by his life and teaching 2000 years ago, is now becoming the reality that people the world over must grasp if the world and humankind are to have a future. We human beings are interdependent and "we cannot be human alone". We cannot retreat into behaving like tribes or thinking our nation can go it alone: poisoning and polluting the atmosphere, causing holes in the ozone shield, global warming, food shortages, with population growth and migration, and the affects of all these aggravated by wars. No nation on its own can cope with the forces of the cosmos over which we have no control altering this planet and the universes beyond.

In seconds hundreds of thousands of men and women, embryos in wombs and children, have been crushed and swept into oblivion in Burma and China. These are the victims of massive movements of air turbulence and tectonic plates deep beneath the surface of the earth and rocks on which we walk and build. In 1623 John Donne, poet and priest, Dean of St Paul's Cathedral London, great preacher and Anglican divine, penned these words 385 years ago during a serious illness:

*"No man is an Island, entire of itself. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind; And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee."*ⁱ

The bell tolls for the hundreds of thousands who have died and for those survivors maimed for the rest of their lives in body and mind. In such catastrophes often the suffering is found to have been made worse by human greed, carelessness, ignorance, deceit, paranoia and obsession for power over others. As always the people responsible right down line are now scrambling to evade being held liable.

Meantime we hear the woolly minded who get radio, TV, Hollywood and Bollywood films and DVDs dismissing the notion of "SIN". And from some religious groups we hear a great deal

about sin, but they seem obsessed by a fear of sex and certainly do not give proportionate time and effort to change the world structures which cause injustice and the evils of war and violence.

With the traumas around us in mind, let us move now to think about Jesus' life and teaching. Jesus was a Jew. From his birth and circumcision he was brought up to observe all that the religion of his tribe and family had taught him. He studied the Hebrew Scriptures and he was shaped by the conviction in them that **whatever** earthly rulers 'Pharaohs', Kings', 'Emperors', 'Chief Priests' or religious leaders may decree or do, there is another reality, another influence, another Power beyond human powers, to which we are all answerable and from whom we can draw courage and strength. Abram and the Hebrew patriarchs, Moses and the prophets acknowledged this "Guide-God" influencing them as they struggled for what they were convinced was right, and as they suffered and their loved ones died for what was to come after their time.

A summary of the core of Jesus' teachings is found in what is often called "The Sermon on the Mount" in the Gospel according to Matthew chapters 5 to 7. In the chapter 5, Jesus no less than six times set himself over against traditional authorities and attitudes with the repetition:

"You have heard'...**But I say to you...**' For example:

- In chapter 5, verse 21, "You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'.... **But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable....**".
- In 5:43, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy'. **But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...'**

Jesus' "divergence from the outlook of contemporary Judaism concerned no mere question of interpretation or reform within Judaism itself ... The point at issue was the meaning of Jesus' work as a whole, which involved the setting up of himself as a rival authority to that on which Judaism was based, the Law. ... 'The Kingdom of God' is the central theme of the teaching of Jesus, and it involves his whole understanding of his own person and work." ⁱⁱ

In these weeks after Pentecost the gospel readings again and again are about Jesus speaking of "the kingdom of God". We read that Jesus went about all the cities and villages teaching in the synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom (Mtt 9:35) and he sent 12 chosen followers out as apprentices to get some practical experience. "As you go proclaim the kingdom of heaven has come near" (Mtt 10:7).

What did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? The answer different Christians give to this question leads directly to the cause of many of the disputes fracturing the churches today.

Jesus was always talking about God. In talking to his followers and to the crowds Jesus used similes, metaphors, analogies, parables, paradoxes (saying opposite things to challenge people to think) and picture language drawn from our human experience, to point to a mystery which for us humans is beyond our physical dimensions. Jesus, by what he said, demonstrated that we have to **search** for true wisdom about God and how to live. He certainly did not regard himself as being bound to take literally what was written in the Hebrew Scriptures or passed down in the traditions of the Temple or Synagogues. He dissented from much that was recorded and said, "But I say to you...".

No one can reduce God to a series of rational statements. This is what many religious institutions and theorists (theologians, philosophers, preachers and functionaries) have often tried to do, by their arguments or subtle changes to the forms of worship. Let me give you an example of such a change that has spread like a plague in many Christian denominations. In the old Church of England Book of Common Prayer, produced in 1662 when most people could neither read nor write, there were instructions (called “rubrics” because they were printed in red) about how the readings from the Bible should be introduced and concluded. The rubric for the ending was *“Here endeth the first (or second) Lesson or “Here endeth the Epistle”, etc.* When in 1978 An Anglican Prayer Book (AAPB) was printed, and again in 1995 when A Prayer Book for Australia was produced, the rubric was significantly changed to “After each reading the reader may say, *‘Hear the word of the Lord,’* and the congregation responds, *‘Thanks be to God.’* The problem is that not everything in the Bible, or read from it in public worship, can literally be called “the word of God”. This very recent (20 year old) rubric is puzzling and misleading, particularly to visitors. It would be far better if we stopped bleating like a mob of sheep! Far better to have a moment of Silence for everybody to reflect. Or, like many congregations we could adopt a form of words that reflects the probing and discerning style of Jesus in his approach to Scriptures; for example, the reader may conclude by saying: ***“Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church”***, then all respond with, ***“Thanks be to God”***.

Truth is not to be found on the surface, either in events on the surface of the earth or of the Bible or of the Qur’an or any other document. The Spirit of God led the dedicated practicing Jew, Saul of Tarsus, through a dramatic conversion to become Paul the Apostle to the nations. He travelled extensively taking the Way of Jesus out beyond the tribal limitations of Judaism to the centre of the Roman Empire. He stood up against the cautious limitations that James and the Christian group in Jerusalem and Peter the Galilean fisherman, who tried to put obstacles in the way of non-Jews being fully accepted into Christian communities. Paul expanded onto the world stage the mission that Jesus began among the “tribes of Israel”, his own people. Wherever he went Paul spoke from his own experience of being changed by the Spirit-that-was-in-Jesus to understand that God is encountered in every person. No written document can define or limit the Spirit of God.

What all the great religions have sought are answers to the question, **How are we to live?** Wisdom about how to live has to be discerned, it does not lie on the surface. As those seeking to follow Christ we believe that Jesus, more than any other human being, discerned where and how we can find the Way to live.

In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus using vivid picture language, encompasses in 250 words issues which if we really “heard” could change our lives. *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life....Look at the birds of the air ... Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life Consider the lilies of the fields... Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* Every simile and metaphor that Jesus used contains stark realism. Clothes with which we clothe our bodies wear out, and so do we. Birds die and fall to earth. Lilies like weeds die and become compost. We are no different from them, or from people in Zimbabwe or refugees in South Africa who do not know what will happen to them today, let alone tomorrow.

Jesus calls us to LIVE now, not speculate or theologize about the future. According to Jesus in the Gospels, we are not to be anxious about what happens after death, about whether our souls are “saved” or not, or what happens beyond this life. *“So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.”* Jesus message was become aware of the presence of God all around us every day, to trust in

God as he did, then we will better approach whatever the future brings. Jesus encouraged people to allow themselves to be shaped by God in the midst of every new challenge that the future brings.

When Jesus knew his time was up because religious and secular leaders found him a threat to their privileges, we read of him saying that “*the Spirit of truth... will guide you into all the truth*” (John 15:12). Today we find the Spirit of God *as lived out by Jesus* at work in different ways all over the world.

There are hundreds of emergency aid workers, defence and military forces, pilots, civil engineers, skilled and unskilled helpers who have no time to worry about tomorrow. In trying to care for those afflicted by natural or man-made disasters, they are doing what Jesus calls us to do. In them we can see the Spirit of God working. We can celebrate whenever we find the Spirit of God *as lived out by Jesus* at work, whether it is by an indigenous person of any tribe, Hindu, Buddhist, Jew, Christian, Moslem or someone who professes no religion or is antagonistic to all religions.

In the words of hymnwriter Brian Wren:

Praise the restless, roving Spirit,
breeze of Christ and breath of God,
kindling faith and power to share it,
quick to comfort, nudge, and prod!

Culture's heroes tempt and lure us,
smashing wrong with righteous force,
but the wounds of Christ can cure us,
marking out a wiser course.

Spirit, give us Christ's persistence;
raise us when our spirit cowers,
freed for peaceful, firm, resistance
to our world's corrupted powers.

Keep us hopeful and forgiving,
loving when we disagree,
by our liturgy and living
hinting how the world will be.

ⁱ John Donne 1571/2-163, poet, priest of the Church of England and Dean of St Paul's Cathedral London from 1621. Dr John Donne, the Anglican divine, during a serious illness in 1623, wrote these words in his *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* 1624.

ⁱⁱ Alan Richardson, MA, DD, Professor of Christian Theology, University of Nottingham, art. in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible* (SCM Press 1956, p.119)

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