

The Third Sunday after Epiphany
Year A - 26/1/2020

Isaiah 9:1-4
Psalm 27:1-10
1 Corinthians 1:10-18
Matthew 4:12-25

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

It is a wonderful recurring theme that we have throughout this season of Epiphany - the coming of the light. In this season of Theophany - the making known of God through the person of Christ - we are presented with a series of readings which seek to bring us a picture of the way in which Christ might be known, and challenge us to think about ways in which Christ's light might shine through us, so that we might be a beacon of light in a dark world.

Which is why at least the first part of today's Gospel passage seems a little odd, a bit out of place. At first glance, it might appear to be nothing more than a historical report, setting up the more exciting theological chapters of Matthew 5-7 that follow with their focus on the Sermon on the Mount.

Because of this, one might simply be inclined to treat this as a report that after John's arrest, Jesus began his public ministry and then an account of his first actions: a summary of his proclamation, the call of the first disciples, and then a vague report of some healings.

It is telling, however, that Matthew draws on Isaiah's ancient prophecy, situating Jesus Christ as the one who comes to bring light to darkness. And in that context, his opening proclamation is challenging - "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Most often, when we hear this word - repent - our first instinct is to reflect on our brokenness; our sin, and to feel unworthy; guilty. In fact, a better rendering of the Greek word used here is "Be of a new mind!" Or, perhaps as "Change your way of thinking!" Or most simply, "Listen to this!"

The reminder here is that Jesus has come not simply to turn people's minds around, but also to proclaim a completely different kind of reality—God's revealed good news, the news that in the cross of Christ the unexpected reality of God's gracious love has broken into the fallen world (that is to say that, as Jesus puts it, "the kingdom of God has drawn near").

Our vision, therefore, is not one of moral righteousness (a simple repentance); rather, Christ comes, proclaiming and heralding a completely different reality! It is a reality marked by the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, the new creation of all that is dead and fallen, and the reconciliation of all things to God.

It is the announcement that none of the common-sense ways of thinking of the world has understood or ever could understand. The cross is the ultimate statement of this different reality. The cross, after all, as Paul reminds the Corinthians, is foolishness and a stumbling block to the best ways of worldly thinking. Nobody could ever make it up, because our minds are simply not capable of grasping how differently God works.

And at the end of this morning's Gospel, the alternate reality of the kingdom of God is given a tangible imagination by the picture it draws of the sort of community that Jesus the Christ gathers around himself. This is what it says:

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people. So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought to him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and he cured them (Matthew 4:23-24).

What a beautiful community! What an alternative vision of the kingdom! Disabled folks, sick folks, ill folks of every kind. And people of all sorts of ethnicities and religions. Not just Jews from Galilee, but Syrians and probably other gentiles. We are given this wonderful vision of the peaceable kingdom here that speaks of the beauty and counter-cultural nature of inclusion.

I wonder - in our own time and context, what would this alternative and beautiful vision of community look like. For surely we are called not simply to admire and dream of such things, but actively and passionately work for them. I've had a few thoughts about it as I've reflected during the week. So, for what it's worth, conscious that it's just my mind at work here - these are mine:

Firstly, this parish - last week I challenged you to think about how what we do here as a community needs to be more than just a measure designed to attract more people to worship here; that our actions, our nature of community needs to be something that causes people to look at us and say "wow - look at the way in which these people live; see the love and care and concern they have for others; see the ways in which they are reaching out with compassion and mercy to those in need.

That is the sort of alternative and beautiful reality that today's Gospel sets before us - a community of broken people who recognise their brokenness; who understand what it means to forgive when someone messes up; that displays patience and kindness to those who are hurting and so will lash out for no apparent reason; a church who welcomes and includes people, even when they don't look like you, or think like you.

What if we are to cast our minds a bit wider - what about the church? It's fair to say that, as an institution, we have suffered enormously over the past few years. The scandals around abuse; the harsh and dogmatic ways in which some sections of the church have defended their views on marriage; the hypocritical stance of the church towards the LGBTIQ+ community; these are ways in which the wider church simply does not measure up to the vision that Jesus proclaims today.

So, we must be better than this - we must stand for the powerless and the dispossessed. We must speak out against injustice, and remind the wider community of the love and care that God has for **all** of humanity (not just some), and **all** of creation, as this fragile earth waits, as we do, the final coming of our Saviour.

And what about our nation - on this of all days - alternatively known as Australia Day, Survival Day, even Invasion Day, we must, I believe, strive to do more. Until we are able to walk together with the First Peoples of this land, we will have failed to live up to the proclamation of reconciliation that Jesus brought.

Until we fully welcome those who come seeking refuge and safety in this nation we cannot call ourselves compassionate and loving. Until every citizen of our nation has full and equal access to health care and education and employment, we can hardly rejoice and call ourselves the “lucky country”.

These are but a few of our challenges - issues brought into sharp relief by the proclamation of the Kingdom and how it looks.

It’s hard, isn’t it, to try and wrap your mind around this alternative vision; God’s vision – to hear this passage as not simply another call to morality, or a better way of life, but a challenge to the very fabric of our society; and alternative reality in which we learn that sins are forgiven, graves are split open, lives are transformed, and God’s alternative and-preferred future for the world becomes a reality.

In the coming weeks we will hear how Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem, and to the cross. He will face darkness and opposition and outright hostility to his message. We can expect no less than that ourselves as we seek to embody God’s alternative vision for the church and for the world. May the light of God—revealed in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ—shine through us this season, to lighten the darkness.

In the name of God. Amen.