

Sermon for 23.10.16

The first reading this morning is from one of my favourite books in the Old Testament, the Book of Joel.

It's a favourite of mine because the message from Joel, is one of hope – built on experience.

The story begins with a detailed account of the suffering of the people through a locust plague and a drought.

Then the writer develops a theme of reversal of fortunes through the repentant, prayerful ways of the people as they accept that

Yahweh is with them in their midst.

The relationship experienced between God and the people of Israel, is driven by mutual love, and it is this, that initiates a far broader reversal of fortune - the promise that Yahweh will pour out his spirit on all flesh.

In the gospel passage today Jesus continues to instruct his disciples about the way of the kingdom on earth and the age to come.

In respect to everyday life experience, a total change of perspective is being evoked here.

The disciples are being taught how to relate to the God who loves them – in a more personal way.

In effect they are being taught how to live in an intimate relationship with God and with each other.

The teachings relate that they are to be humble, grateful, prayerful and live in penitent faith.

They are taught to love their enemies, to forgive 7 times 7 and more.

They are not to retaliate in kind when they are struck, but rather in love, and they are to love their neighbour as themselves.

In the gospel passage today we hear a little more of the detail of the change of perspective evoked by Jesus.

We hear how children are also valued in God's kingdom and not passed over as may well have been the custom of the day.

Children are the ones, Jesus tells the disciples, who through their complete trust of those who love and care for them, demonstrate the humble trust he has been speaking of all along.

There is nothing sentimental here about Jesus love for children, but rather he sees to the heart of what it means to receive Gods kingdom;

“For it is to such as these children that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

By contrast, the rich ruler who appears so confident, so well organised, so determined, looks into the face of the one he calls “good” and turns away sad.

He couldn't let go of the material wealth that afforded him control in the old way.

He couldn't trust himself totally to the new.

He couldn't accept God's kingdom like a child, with the humble trust that allowed God to be God in his life.

Jesus was bringing into operation a change that many Jews had longed for: Gods kingdom, God's sovereign saving power operating in a new way, for the benefit of the whole world in the present time and in the age to come.

Evil and death, were still going on all around.

Jesus himself had yet to face the full force of the powers of the old age. But where he was, and where people with humble and penitent trust accepted that God's kingdom was active in and through him, there the life of the new age began to be seen.

When we look at the teachings of Jesus and how they connect with the life experience of every age, we see that disciples of every age are not being asked to view proceedings about the way of the kingdom, from afar.

Each parable, each story, invites us into a life experience that we can relate to, that we can identify with through our own.

In Jesus teachings we are being presented with stories that connect with us and draw us into the portrait of God's kingdom on earth.

Stories that make us part of the portrait.

We are therefore not being asked to make a detached evaluation or judgement, but rather the opposite.

We are invited to come from within the stories of our own lives that are intertwined with the way of the kingdom in Jesus.

When we remember the story in the book of Joel, we see clearly that it was through the peoples life experience that they learned more about their God and trusted that he was in their midst.

It was from that relationship, that fortunes were reversed and God promised to pour out his Spirit on all people.

And this promise, in our belief, is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, for in him the reality of intimacy with God and each other is offered. In him the face of God and the face of humanity come together in communion with each other.

My prayer for us all is that we are blessed and continue to be blessed with the openness and trust that little children have, as present day disciples and that we live in humility, gratitude and penitent faith.

The Lord be with you.

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