

Sermon for 27.10.19 Rev'd Jenny Simson

The first reading this morning from the Book of Joel is a favourite of mine because it speaks of hope that is born out of the experience of the people.

When we learn anything from experience rather than simply by theory - we seem more apt to learn from it - and, hopefully what we learn makes a difference for the better in our lives.

In today's story from Joel this is the case. The people had suffered greatly through a locust plague and drought - and in their distress they had turned to God whom they believed was with them in their suffering, in humble, repentant prayerfulness.

Now from their togetherness with God --the love that bound them together initiated something that was to involve all human beings - and this was the promise that Yahweh would pour out his spirit on all flesh.

In the gospel passage Jesus continues to walk towards Jerusalem teaching the way of the kingdom. He teaches the disciples the reality of how to live in the love of God.

They are to be humble, grateful, and prayerful and live in penitent faith. They are to be like children who through their spontaneity, their spirit of dependence, their sense of wonderment and their complete trust of those who love and care for them, demonstrate the trust he speaks about as the heart of what it means to receive God's kingdom.

Then of course there is the other side of the coin and in the gospel story it is the way of the rich ruler who is self-confident and well organised. He was a man who had many things. Wealth, authority, and high standing in the community. We hear his confidence in the familiarity with which he addresses Jesus: "Good teacher what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus' reply invites him to reflect on his own words, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone"".

Jesus directs him to the commandments that are related to relationship between fellow humans--none about our relationship to God. That comes later. The ruler replies that he has kept these commandments since his youth.

Jesus then challenges him with the one thing still lacking. He is to sell all he owns and follow Jesus. There is here an implied call to faith and trust in God. The ruler must adopt a life-style of caring for those in need as exemplified in selling all his possessions and distributing them to the poor; he must follow Jesus.

The other disciples had already done this as Peter makes clear later in the story.

All this represents a reversal of accepted ideas for it was commonly held that riches were a sign of God's blessing, which meant that the rich had the best opportunity of getting the good things of this world and of the next.

Luke does not actually say that the young man refused to do what Jesus directed him to do, only that he became sad for he was very rich. And I'm sure on some level at least some of us can identify with the challenge of the rich young ruler because as we know it is not easy to move beyond something that we have put together for our own security it life.

It can take a long time to shift from this way of being, if we ever do, yet to remain in it is to miss what Jesus teaches us that our ultimate happiness is by the grace of God not our independence from God. The same is true, of course, of those whose riches are other than material. The writer of Matthew tells us “He who seeks his life will lose it; and he who loses his life for my sake will find it.”

In his ministry, Jesus brought into being a change that many Jews had longed for: the way of God’s power operating in a new way, for the benefit of the whole world in the present time and in the age to come. The misery of the world in Jesus time was still going on all around, as it is today.

Yet 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.

It is the same today as he is birthed in us – the new age has begun in us and in the communities we are in. That is what we as a community of believers bring to the wider community - newness in Christ.

This too is a reversal of accepted ideas in our era, for we live in a very secular society which is geared in many ways for self-dependence, self-indulgence and self-absorption. Yet, as we learn from the ministry of Jesus - when we are seeking our true self – our authentic self - we will never find it by seeking anything other than God. For it is in God’s grace that we live and grow. This is what we hear clearly in Jesus’ reply to those who feared for their own salvation: “And who can be saved, they asked? Jesus answers “what is impossible for mortals is possible for god.”

As followers of Christ we are called to know God not in theory only but in and through our lived experience in our relationship with him. |We are called to be dependent, open and receptive like children for it is then that we seek not our own happiness but we seek God who brings us into our happiness and our wholeness.

The Lord be with you.

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