

Sermon: 3rd Sunday before Lent 2017 12 Feb 2017

What lifts your heart and raises your vision to give you a purpose above all the everyday troubles that assail us? When I first met Anne it seems to me now that my whole focus in life suddenly changed with the goal of winning that prize. All of the worries assailing me at the time suddenly seemed as nothing. Certainly both readings today are addressing real problems of life but do so against a vision of hope and life in God. Jesus declares at the beginning of his ministry Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. It's about a new life creating in us a new heart.

Paul in Chapter 3 of his 1st letter to the Corinthians is attempting to deal with factions and differences in the church community in Corinth. In fact these divisions are so serious that it's the first thing Paul raises in his long letter in Chapter 1. Where technically he should be saying in such a letter I thank God for you he says, "What's going on with all these factions?" Some people are saying: I am for Paul, I am for Apollos, I belong to Peter or the most difficult faction "I belong to Christ". We can all have people who have made a great impact on us. For the Corinthians, Apollos was a preacher who was "fervent in Spirit", Paul quieter but more methodical and he first brought them the good news. –Peter well he had been with Jesus from the start, a chap you can sit and have a beer with. But then in Chapter 2 Paul lifts their eyes from the personalities towards the wonders of all that God has given us and attempts to lift their eyes from division.

*"What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him"*

The jealousy and quarrelling within the church were clearly severe. Paul is calling the people to lift their eyes so that they might get a glimpse of what God has prepared for them so that their hearts will be overwhelmed by the God who loves them. Sometimes real issues do need to be resolved so Paul returns to it again in our reading from Chapter 3. When we visited a Church in India although the Christians at ground level seemed to be getting on well, they were planting new churches. But in the corridors of power there were many stories of corruption and questions as to who had control of the money and the land. Some leaders there seem to have been overwhelmed by the money and property instead of being overwhelmed by all that God had for them. A new heart was needed at the centre as well as amongst the people.

In our Gospel today Jesus addresses important issues of the day in 4 sections out of a total of six. We are of course very early in the gospel in Chapter 5. In Chapter 3

John the Baptist has been proclaiming “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”. Jesus is baptised by John and spends 40 days in the wilderness in Chapter 4 and starts his ministry in Galilee proclaiming “Repent for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand”. Jesus encourages the people to repent or turn around. We have become rather accustomed to thinking of Repent as unpleasant, shouted out by a strange man with a dark raincoat, “Repent you sinners!”. The obligatory rejection of the sin we rather enjoy. There is an Orthodox view that our repentance is the beginning of our resurrection of life. The focus of our repentance is not our own looking back on our own imperfection but looking forward on the perfect love of Jesus who is good and loves humankind. In repentance our primary orientation is not towards our past but towards our future a vision of God and life which invites us to gladly shake off the sin that so closely clings to us. In the parable of the prodigal son it is the son’s vision of food at his father’s table, of a future that causes him to turn round and go back.

Jesus declares “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”, then in chapter 5 the sermon on the mount begins with Jesus proclaiming the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and goes on to talk of us as being salt and light in the world. Just as we are all feeling good about ourselves Jesus launches into 6 sections addressing social issues each one beginning:

“You have heard it said”.

Jesus is pointing back to the teachings of the Jewish law and of the Rabbis.

“You have heard it said”. But adds *“but I say to you”*

Well of course it seems these days that people can spout any words without an ounce of truth or support as though it doesn’t matter. Two of the issues Jesus addresses are about what we say. Jesus clearly thinks that what we say is important. If you are angry it is like being a murderer. If you say to your brother or sister “You fool” you will be liable to the fire of hell – God does take what we say seriously. The Psalmist says:

*“May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing to you O Lord my rock and my redeemer”.*

Jesus said let your words be yes, yes or no, no with no need for an oath just words that are trustworthy.

In the central two sections we find that Jesus does not shy away from difficult issues addressing adultery and lust, marriage and divorce. The importance of marriage in the Christian and Jewish Communities is a key theme in the scriptures but Jewish Law did allow for divorce in Deuteronomy in cases of adultery and in Exodus in cases of neglect. Everyone would have known that. However at the time of Jesus a Jewish sect of the Hillel rabbis introduced an “Any cause” divorce. Any cause for them could be the wife burning a meal. And it did not require any proof to be given in court the husband could just give the wife a certificate of divorce and go off and find another more pleasing wife. Certainly in Matthew 19 Jesus again addresses divorce and it does seem this is the particular target. An example of this “any cause” divorce for a trivial reason was found amongst the Dead Sea Scrolls. But Jesus emphasis is on the importance and fidelity of marriage which shouldn’t be undermined by such an easy divorce certificate for trivial issues. So the church is concerned to uphold marriage and fidelity.

Imploring people to cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes to stop them falling into lust and adultery seems shocking to modern sensibilities but it does emphasise the drastic action required to guard against temptation. To cut ourselves off from a line of thought. This most aptly applies to what we look at on the internet. Pornography on the internet and its degrading of the human spirit and relationships certainly requires this kind of shock response. I would rather pluck out my eye. No. I’m not looking at that.

But all these serious issues are set against the backdrop of hope of repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. We are drawn towards the growth or building of God’s Kingdom. As we pull up the weeds and dig over the ground in that hope of spiritual growth Paul reminds us that whilst we do what we can digging and watering but it is God that gives the growth. We turn our eyes and hearts around to try to get a glimpse of God’s kingdom to make him welcome but it is in the hope of our God who brings the growth and the harvest and brings his kingdom near. As we glimpse the new life of God’s kingdom may God renew our hearts and release the new life and growth of God’s kingdom, God’s resurrection life, among us.