

Mission 3: Demonstrating the Kingdom of God

Jesus teaches: John 3:1-8, Matthew 4:12-17, 23-25

The last two Sundays we considered God's word, as the source of the nourishment necessary if we are to reach spiritual maturity. I made reference to Revelation 10 and John's visionary encounter with an angel carrying a little scroll. The angel tells John to eat the scroll and that it would be as sweet as honey. I described it as a metaphor for taking God's word and eating it so that it becomes assimilated into our being and, as Dan expounded last week that it comes to make up our spiritual DNA.

If you looked up the verse you'll see I missed out a bit. Today I want to include it because I think we hope that Christian life will be sweet and that our life following Christ can always be sweet so let me read the whole text to you. Revelation 10:10.

¹⁰So I took the small scroll from the hand of the angel, and I ate it! It was sweet in my mouth, but when I swallowed it, it turned sour in my stomach.

Sometimes when we read the Bible in the plain sense we wished it said something different. It requires us to exercise faith. We see God in the Old Testament as somehow a different god to that in the New Testament. God is unchanging and wholly consistent. The 20th century prophet AW Tozer put it like this:

Holiness is the way God is. To be holy he does not conform to a standard. He is that standard. He is absolutely holy with an infinite incomprehensible fullness of purity.

Today we look at the second stanza of our mission statement:

Demonstrating the Kingdom of God

*"It's really hard to get used to the idea that the Kingdom of God has absolutely nothing whatsoever to do with natural ways of doing things but it **is** a reality that as Christians we are a part.*

"When we welcome the Kingdom of God in the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer, "Let Your kingdom come and Your will be done," what we are ultimately asking God to do is step in and override the way that things go naturally. Jesus gives to us this power and authority and we need to learn to use it."

When we follow Christ we should get used to the idea that we're being called not to conform to the patterns of this world but to live in the reality of the kingdom of God. This is so often an

offence to others. God's economy is so different; the least is first, the least becomes the greatest, the widow's mite becomes of more worth than the rich man's gold. This is because there is an inevitable confrontation with the principalities and powers, the rulers in the spiritual realms, it is also because our neighbours and our young people are the first to notice a mismatch between what we say in our creeds and what we live in practice. Our own feelings of bitterness in our stomach, as we read God's word, come when we have not exercised faith in the stewardship of the resources God has entrusted to us, or when we have not given attention to the prompting of the quiet voice of God to act in the way Jesus would have us act. Only faith can be the Alka-Seltzer or the Rennes that will settle that feeling of bitterness in our stomach.

If you are the Rt. Revd Dhloraj Canagasabey, Bishop of Colombo, it takes courage to speak out in the face of a breakdown in democracy, and law and order and an emerging dictator (and we should pray for him and the church in Sri Lanka). It also takes courage to do the things Jesus taught in peace when we can so easily be lured into complacency. It requires integrity between the impression we might give on Sunday and in our Small Groups and what we laugh at on Monday, or look at on Tuesday, what we say to our friends on Wednesday, and how we spend our money on Thursday, and who we put first in our diary on Friday, and whether we take up an offer on Saturday and so are not in the place of worship on a Sunday.

Don't you love the story of Nicodemus in John 3? I think I always have. Jesus, we read in many places, was gathered around by crowds as he taught them, but he also had time for a one-on-one. Nicodemus knew from the miraculous that Jesus was a teacher sent *from* God. What we possess in Christ is *from* God. It is not human philosophy or religion, nor does it conform to the rules of physics or biology but it is of an altogether different dimension or realm, it is the kingdom of God. This realm is one of *faith* in the eternal being of the Father who we come into relationship with through Jesus. It calls us not to blend in with the world but as a church, in the reality of this kingdom to speak prophetically. Belonging to the kingdom of God calls for a life of holiness. Stephen Barton the editor of a book, *Holiness, Past and Present* writes in the foreword:

To attend to holiness...is to attend to a matter that lies at the very heart of what it means to become fully human.

So what does it mean to become fully human? In John 3:5, Jesus said to Nicodemus, "*I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.*"

To become fully human we must be born of water and the Spirit; you mustn't be surprised at this, says Jesus, and yet we are surprised.

To be those who truly demonstrate the kingdom of God and not things that are just good of themselves, *we*, individually and personally, need to be empty vessels, cracked clay pots, mules, willing to be filled with God's Spirit and prepared to listen and act in obedience to the things Jesus teaches us.

Turn with me to Matthew 4 and verse 17. Notice how Jesus begins his preaching, *"Repent of your sins and turn to God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near."* If we're honest it's not an attractive message, is it? It unashamedly points out that a change of direction is needed. That change of direction is not a simple about turn. Yes it does need a crisis moment. But for all those who can't remember the time and date they submitted their lives to Christ don't worry, there is much more here in the word repent. Those who don't consider themselves academic please bear with me, what I'm about to say is not complicated. The Gk. word *metanoete* (Μετανοεῖτε) is not a once-off action, a moment, as in *metanoia*, a word some of you may be familiar with. The word used here in Matt 4:17 is of present, imperative, active, plural tense. That means this living the life of a Christian disciple requires us to go on every day deliberately making choices that are governed by what God's word teaches us, who through the Spirit enlightens our minds and changes our hearts to live the life and walk the road that Jesus lived and walked. Then we can say with confidence, as Jesus instructed the 72 in Luke 10:9, and after healing the sick, 'The Kingdom of God is near you now.'

Revd Peter Cunliffe 27th January 2013