

Along the track

The Kingdom of God is Here

(Second of four meditations on the Kingdom)

Jesus began his ministry after forty days and nights in the desert. He crossed the Jordan and walked back to the town of Capernaum in his beloved Galilee. He was about 32 years old. Capernaum was largely a fishing town but it was regularly visited by local landless peasants working as day labourers for the large landholders in the surrounding vineyards and farms. Jesus' best friends were fishermen – Simon and Andrew who came from Bethsaida with a home in Capernaum where Jesus stayed often, James and John, and Solome and Mary from the port town of Magdala.

Jesus began visiting the villages of Galilee. As he walked from village to village he met the marginalised, the outcasts, the lepers, the battlers, those labeled as sinful and cast out of community life. They were the first to hear the message that the Kingdom of God is here among you. Jesus began to heal the sick, to cast out demons to show them that being outcasts or sick or marginalised was not God's intention, God's way. He spoke of feasts and meals where everyone was welcome – he spoke in a language that resonated with the lives of these people, he gathered disciples from among these men and women who were willing to follow him.

Some years ago I had dinner with one of my daughters in a restaurant in Carlton. Next to us a large, extended Italian family was having what could only be described as an 'exuberant celebration'. During a lull in the celebration, I asked the father at the end of the table what was the occasion? One of his daughters had recently recovered from a very serious illness but, if that was not cause enough, one of his boys had returned home. His relationship with his father had not been an easy one but he was back. Does that sound familiar?!

The Kingdom of God is close at hand (Mark 1:15), Jesus said that we must be alert and ready to see it (Luke 12:35-40; Matthew 25:1-13). That's not as easy as it looks because we all have, as people in Jesus' time did, preconceived notions as to what it should look like, what it should be. That's why Jesus calls us to conversion, to metanoia, a change of mind and heart, to look with other eyes, to look for God's presence, to live with compassion, to be open to others without judgement.

It was in that sort of language and in those sorts of stories that Jesus spoke about the kingdom – it was not something that was not of this world but very much a part of it, very much a part of our lives.

The marginalised, the poor, the hungry, the afflicted responded to Jesus the itinerant preacher who carried no purse, who had no home, no paid employment. In a sense, he was one of them, he understood them. His care for the sick was extraordinary, particularly as sickness was regarded as a result of the victim's sin. People flocked to hear him as they had not heard a message like it, particularly not from their own religious leaders. The lifestyle he followed was a living example that the Kingdom of God is not about returning Israel to power, to confirming the high and mighty in their thrones and in

their positions of power, but rather it exists wherever, whenever God's power is making love, reconciliation and healing possible. God's vision, God's dream or will for our world is at work wherever people are faithful to the command that we love one another as God first loved us.

The Kingdom of God is here. This saving presence of God can be found in our everyday personal experiences. Whenever people love one another, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, work to build up a just and peaceful community—wherever people are of humble heart, open to their Creator and serving their neighbour, God's redemptive and liberating presence is being manifested. God's Kingdom and loving rule is in operation there.

Not everyone welcomed this message. It just didn't compute – it wasn't what they were expecting. Jesus' message was not about overthrowing foreign powers, he was not establishing new structures, new teachings, new doctrines. Although daily life in his time was not easy, although he lived in an occupied land, although people were dispossessed and God seemed to have abandoned the Chosen People, for Jesus this was not a perverse world, suffering the effects of sin, subject to the powers of evil. The Kingdom of God was here – in all this mess and disappointment, in this suffering and hardship, but in the joys and hopes of people as well, in their care and concern for each other in whatever circumstances they may find themselves.

For many of the leaders of the Jewish faith, it was a hard message. In good faith many of them, during this period that they regarded as a time of abandonment and virtual exile from God, had concocted laws and rituals to keep the people faithful and to purify them and to hold them together. They saw their role as leading them to scrupulous fidelity in every aspect of the ancient law, ancient rituals and traditional beliefs. They yearned and toiled for the restoration of the old ways, the old Israel. But Pope Francis warns those who see this as a way forward:

"If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, then he will find nothing. Tradition and memory of the past must help us to have the courage to open up new areas to God. Those who today always look for disciplinarian solutions, those who long for an exaggerated doctrinal 'security', those who stubbornly try to recover a past that no longer exists - they have a static and inner-directed view of things. In this way faith becomes an ideology among other ideologies. ... (A Big Heart Open to God, America Magazine Sept 30, 2013)

So what do we do?

Regards
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