

# The Kingdom of God ...

*... is both now and not yet*

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*A sermon given on the Twenty-first Sunday of Trinity, 20th October 2024, by the Mission Priest, the Revd Eileen Connolly, in Beverley Minster*

*Isaiah 53:4-end; Mark 10:35-45*

The first reading from the Prophet Isaiah is a very beautiful and moving, poetic piece: a picture of the man known as the 'Suffering Servant' - this man who went through a miscarriage of justice; was cruelly treated; wrongly accused and convicted; who suffered and died a torturous death. This man was Jesus, the man who was from God, whose death wasn't a tragic mistake, and it wasn't the tragedy that it looked like. It was actually planned by God. This piece was written hundreds of years before the actual birth and life and death of Jesus and it was a foretelling of what was to happen. It reminds me of the goats that every year at Yom Kippur would be led to the water by the high priest: one of the goats would be killed and the blood would be used as a sacrifice for the sins of the people; the other goat, the priest would lay his hands on the head of the goat and confess all the sins of the community and then that goat was then released into the wilderness to meet its doom in the wilderness - that was the 'scapegoat' - the original meaning of that phrase. Jesus was like the scapegoat because Jesus bore our infirmities and carried our diseases, as it says in Isaiah 53. Why did he do that? Because the people could not save and heal themselves. The Jewish people recognised that they needed a saviour and a mediator between them and God because of the things that came between them. Someone who could take away the sin, the shame, the fear and the guilt so that they could live a life free as children of God, as God always intended, and so they could have their God as their Father. And so do we. None of us can save ourselves. Not one of us is good enough or worthy enough to find favour with God, no matter how good we are, how many good deeds or how much we give a way to charity. It doesn't earn favour with God. We live within a system which the theologian, Walter Wink, calls the 'domination system' with violence at its core. Jesus had to die to defeat this system, so that those accepting his sacrifice be given eyes which are open to God's alternate society - a society ruled not by violence or greed or power, but by God's love, his justice, and his mercy - this is the Kingdom of God.

Now, I wonder if the disciples of Jesus in the gospel from Mark, knew the prophecy of the suffering servant. If they did, I don't think they'd quite connected it to their Rabbi Jesus, the one they'd spent three years in apprenticeship to. And before the reading, Jesus had started to reveal what was going to happen to him, that even though they were in the throes of popularity and celebrity and things were going well, things would soon be changed. It somehow seems a bit of a comedy that while Jesus is talking about his death, the disciples, James and John, are saying, Oh, who's going to sit at his left or right-hand? They want these places of honour. In a previous passage, they were arguing about who was the greatest. In Matthew's gospel, he seems a bit embarrassed that the disciples hadn't got it and they were so concerned with their own ambition because Matthew has this request made by James and John's mother, not the actual men. But I somehow think it was the men themselves who asked, let's not blame the mother, it was the men.

Now, we can sit here at the end of the story and judge those two disciples for their ambition and their desire for security in the eternal kingdom. But let me ask you a question. When you pass through this mortal coil and you leave this Earth, what would you want to be remembered for? Think for a minute. You could write your own eulogy -what would it say? What legacy would you like to leave behind? What do you want to be known for? I was watching a film the other day - a dramatisation of the life of Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple. According to the film, he was such a driven man, he wanted to make a name for himself and he wanted to have power and control because of an insecurity, and that insecurity was that he was adopted at birth. And so his whole life seemed to make up for that abandonment.

Not many of us would want to be known as failures - in the eyes of the world or in our family or in our church or our workplace or before God. Don't we want to make our lives count? Don't we want to feel that we've made a difference in some way? And yet life is often unpredictable and insecure. Think back to COVID, which seems so far far away, how things were just shaken - our world became so chaotic and dangerous. And in times of global, national, and personal insecurity, we seek something which we can build on. We choose leaders that we think are strong, those who are bullish and have personality, those who are mavericks, because we think they're the ones who are going to get the job done. We don't look at intellect or integrity or experience. We make things black and white. We make things right or wrong so that we can have the security and the certainty that we long for. So maybe James and John were no different to us. Maybe they did know what was going to happen, or they had a sense of it, and they were trying to get that security, that in the end, no matter what, they would have that position; that after only three years with their master, perhaps they faced the reality that they might be on their own with the Romans and the Jewish authorities. Maybe they'd weighed it up and thought, If this does happen, we're not going to find this easy. The least we can do is try to get that security of a secure future. Maybe they weren't power hungry or ambitious. Maybe they were just frightened people and they acted on their fears. Fear is all around us in the world. Fear of terrorism, fear of violence on our streets. Our fears are weaponised by everyone, from the marketing world to the political parties. We even have fear in the church. We fear that in the declining congregations, we will no longer be relevant. We compare and rank ourselves. What are they doing that we're not doing? What should we be doing? We dare not face the reality of the cross, that it was through death and suffering and apparent failure that our redemption was made. Jesus asks James and John, *"Are you able to drink the cup that I drink or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?"*

Rather than see that as a threat, maybe we see that as a promise to us today, that even when that cup comes, that baptism comes, the hard times come, we can trust that Jesus will be with us. Even as we fear, we can trust that his love will cast out fear. He knows all things. The only security of our lives is in him. If we trust him, we will know that peace that is not dependent on our security.

In the message translation of the Bible, it translates Matthew 11 with these words,

*"Are you tired, worn out? Are you burned out on religion? Come home. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me. Watch how I do it and learn the unforced rhythms of grace."*

This Kingdom of God we are in is 'now and not yet'. The Kingdom will come fully at the end of time - it is here now, but it doesn't yet rule. As we trust Jesus, as we give our lives to him, as we

walk in his way, the Kingdom of God grows and grows and grows. But it is a kingdom that is not based on the ways of the world: power and violence and fear and greed. It's a kingdom of love and mercy and justice, preference for the poor and the weak and the vulnerable. It's the complete opposite.

Where do you stand regarding this King and his Kingdom?

Let us pray: *Lord, help us to follow you, to live as you did. Send your Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the truth of this world and the truth of your kingdom, and set us free and empower us to carry on your work of the Kingdom of God. Amen.*

# Reading Texts

## Isaiah 53.4-end

<sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have all turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. <sup>8</sup> By a perversion of justice he was taken away. Who could have imagined his future? For he was cut off from the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people. <sup>9</sup> They made his grave with the wicked and his tomb with the rich, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days; through him the will of the Lord shall prosper. <sup>11</sup> Out of his anguish he shall see light; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will allot him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he poured out himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

## Mark 10:35-45

<sup>35</sup> James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.' <sup>36</sup> And he said to them, 'What is it you want me to do for you?' <sup>37</sup> And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.' <sup>38</sup> But Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism that I am baptised with?' <sup>39</sup> They replied, 'We are able.' Then Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised; <sup>40</sup> but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.' <sup>41</sup> When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John. <sup>42</sup> So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. <sup>43</sup> But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.'