

Epiphany 5
February 5, 2023

Last week, I said that a critical step in moving forward as a parish and as individuals is , to quote Joni Mitchell, to “get back the garden”. In other words, to spend time with the primary sources of our faith – the gospel narratives, the story of the primitive church as told in The Acts and in reading the letters of the leading evangelists – Peter, Paul, James, and John. While the earliest of all these documents can be verified to around 52 CE and written to the community in Thessalonika and the last letter written in the early 90’s, the Church flourished in spite of what was thrown at them by the religious and secular authorities of the day and by controversy in the infant fellowship. As we begin to look at the core of the earliest Christian faith, we also need to remember that what we have as our New Testament does not contain many of the gospels and letters which were in circulation at the time but were deemed as heretical by the powers that be in the Church when they “closed the canon” of the scriptures in 382 CE. When they met in Rome, the intention of the leadership of the Church was to rid herself of any and all writings that seemed sketchy (to them) and that’s what they did. We still have these documents in what is called the Apocryphal New Testament and makes for fascinating reading!!

Why were the early Followers of the Way able to move onwards and upwards in spite of the hardships they faced ? – because they KNEW what they believed in and were willing to pay whatever cost was required to sow the seeds of the kingdom wherever they saw themselves being led by the Lord. They trusted that God would be God and did not need to strike up committees or do studies or send out polls – what motivated them was their complete confidence that God was with them. Indeed, the first to come to this sect of Judaism were asked to make one simple statement in order to join the fellowship – they were to say, “Jesus is Lord” – that was it, that was all! The working out of the nuances of what that meant would take generations and when the Church started to complicate the faith and add all their own “footnotes” to the initial understandings, the message of Jesus became overshadowed by the agenda and the survival tactics of the institution. Even to this day, some of the things that we think are grounded in the Scriptures are rooted in the history of the Church, not in the sacred texts. It would be good for us to do a little purging in order to rediscover what Jesus really said, remembering that what was recorded in the gospels came with the benefit of at least thirty years of post-resurrection living and based on the memories of Peter and others in the primitive community which may or may not have been totally accurate – you know what happens to our memory gene as we get older !.

Let’s this week look simply at one moment in the ministry of Jesus which is, for me, the definitive encapsulating of the simple yet profound message. It finds a place in both Matthew’s and Luke’s gospels – we call it The Sermon on the Mount or the Sermon on the Plain, depending upon which gospel you’re reading! The locations differ, but the Word is the same.

This “sermon” by Jesus may or may not have been spoken exactly as delivered for the first time in the Galilee, but both Matthew and Luke present the clearest synopsis of the conditions for “kingdom-living” which confer upon those who accept these visions of behaviour the title, “BLESSED”. So, what does Jesus say?...

Firstly, that kingdom-living is based on two things: love of God and love of neighbour. The Beatitudes and the rest are relational in nature, with individual and corporate expectations placed upon those who say, “I believe”. They are rooted in the Hebrew understanding of who God is and what God’s relationship is with creation. Second, this relationship between Creator and created is acted out in the world of human experience by how we share life with others. Kingdom-living is not so much about “me” as it is about “us”. It is about, as our Lord’s brother James put it, what we do with what we say which matters to us as persons and as community. Reading Matthew 5: 1-12 or Luke 6:17-23 you can feel the passion Jesus has for welcoming people into the offer God made through the prophet Isaiah, “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat; the calf and the lion and the yearling together. And a little child shall lead them... They will neither harm nor destroy anything on my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea”. (Isaiah 11: 6,9) This is the peaceable kingdom God wants for all us to participate in and the cost of admission is simply LOVE. Rabbi Akiva, one of the most revered of the leaders of first-century Judaism was once challenged by one of his detractors to explain the totality of his faith while stranding on one leg. Grabbing his ankle, he hopped around and said, “ Here O Israel: the Lord our God is one. And you shall love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and spirit; and you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself.” That core still stands for all of us today.

But, what is love? The love of which Jesus spoke is not a Hallmark movie or card sorta thing; it is definitely not what Eric Segal said in his book Love Story, that “love means never having to say you’re sorry”; it is not some sloppy or sentimental warm fuzzy feeling. Love is understanding that the needs of others often takes precedence over the desires of our self; that we are a part of every person we meet and bear a responsibility for their shalom and well-being; that God calls us to share our lives honestly and faithfully with one another; that our commitment is to the peaceable kingdom of the Good Shepherd and the living out of the mandate to “do no harm” to others or ourselves as we seek our own fulfillment and wholeness; to exemplify in our lives and in the life of our Christian community what the Church Father Tertullian meant when he said, “See how these Christians love one another.”

Our mandate is to be Christ-bearers, Christ-proclaimers, Christ-livers in every aspect of our lives. Jesus knew what he was saying and doing in the Galilee when he said, “Blessed are...”: He knew that his vision was revolutionary and radical; that his claim on the hearts and minds and souls of those who heard him speak was a call to turn everything upside down, to face the

glorious rising sun of the Kingdom of God, to embrace the goodness and love of the Trinity and to dance in the joy and freedom of living as fully authentic carriers of the good news- the good news that God is good and God is love. It is the simple message declared by the Beatles when they wrote, “All you need is love” and regardless of how they followed their own teaching, it holds true for all of us – the love we declare as the foundationstone of our faith is revealed not in pious and fancy words, but in the reaching out of our scarred and dirty hands to offer to take the hand of an other and walk with them in the light of the Lord.

SOME THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

1. Read Matthew 5: 1-12 and Luke 6: 17-27

- a) how would you summarize the kingdom-principles that Jesus spoke of?
- b) why are these words of Jesus seen as being revolutionary for both his times and ours?

2. Read Luke 6: 27-36 and Matthew 5: 43-48

- a) why is this so difficult to do?
- b) what is love, to you?
- c) how might Holy Trinity become a more “loving” community?

3. Read Luke 10: 25-37

- a) how did the Samaritan show the kingdom-principles?
- b) how was love shown and what were the potential costs of loving the stranger?

4. Read Matthew 25: 31-46

- a) this passage is a true summary of the kingdom-principles. How do you live those in your own life?
- b) what, according to this passage, are the signs of a healthy kingdom community?
- c) what could you be doing to make Holy Trinity a more compassionate place for you, your family and your neighbours?