

## **There is a King**

Reading: Mark 1: 9 – 15

I'd like to begin with a story I shared a number of years ago but it's worth telling again in the context of today's Bible reading. It's about a nineteenth century missionary by the name of Joseph Damien; sometimes known as Damien of Molokai. Father Damien, as he was also known, was a Roman Catholic priest born in Belgium in 1840. And, after he was ordained, he made his home on the Hawaiian Island of Molokai, not because he was seeking paradise or anything like that, but because he wanted to minister to the inhabitants there. And these were people who had been expelled to Molokai because they were suffering from leprosy. And apparently all of the Hawaiian Islands at that time pushed their lepers on to Molokai; as it was a disease that people feared as there was no cure for it; well certainly not at that time there wasn't.

Well, it's into this setting that Father Damien comes and he's someone who really pours his life out for these people. He embraces the lepers and he loves them. He literally gives his life for them. And one morning as he is pouring boiling water into a cup some of the water splashes out of the cup and falls onto one of Father Damien's bare feet. But he doesn't feel it. So he takes some more boiling water and pours it on to the other foot and there is no sensation from the boiling water in that foot either. And then he realises to his absolute horror that he too has contracted leprosy.

And that morning as he stands up to speak to the colony of lepers that he is ministering to; he changes his usual opening line. He always begins his sermons with the familiar words: "My fellow believers..." But this morning, he begins by saying something very different - "My fellow lepers..." he says. He was now one of them and identifying himself with all the other lepers in the colony.

And there's a sense in which this is a picture of what Jesus came to do for us. He came into this world; a world horribly disfigured by a different kind of disease that the Bible describes as sin; to identify himself with us because he loves us so much. And as we read the New Testament we see how he laid aside all his heavenly glory and majesty to become one of us.

And it's Father Damien's story that leads me into this scene presented to us in this morning's reading from Mark's gospel. And imagine if you can that we have joined a large crowd on the banks of the River Jordan in first century Judea where this strange prophet, John is baptising people in the river. And he's plunging them beneath the water and raising them up again as a sign; a sign that they are turning away from all that clutter and rubbish which we all accumulate in our lives and which gets in the way of us relating to a holy and righteous God. And it's a sign, if you like, of all the bad stuff being washed away. And as we stand there in the crowd we are conscious of many of those around us responding to John's message and going forwards into the river to be baptised.

And as we continue watching we stand amazed as Jesus of Nazareth also steps into the river to be baptised. And why does he do it? Why does he submit to it? John's

baptism is a baptism of repentance and yet he has nothing to repent of, but the answer is very simple – identification.

Jesus is not only identifying with the message and ministry of John but also identifying with us in our sinful humanity. And his being baptised foreshadows the time that is coming for him when he identifies with us on the cross by taking all our sin upon himself and dying in our place so that we might be reconciled to his Father.

And as Jesus comes out of the water he sees heaven being torn open and the Holy Spirit coming upon him. He also hears the voice of the Father addressing him with these words “You are my Son, whom I love; - with you I am well pleased.”

And what we see is Jesus being commissioned and empowered by the Holy Spirit for the ministry which he is soon to begin – but not before a time of severe testing in the desert - a time of testing in which Jesus confronts the power of Satan head on and overcomes. And having passed through this encounter Jesus loses no time in beginning to proclaim the Good News of God all around the region.

And what he proclaims is very direct and compelling: ‘It’s time to turn back to God. The Kingdom of God is at hand. This is God’s time.’ It’s a message that carries a sense of urgency and demands a response. And this is how the Message translation put it: ‘Times up! God’s Kingdom is here. Change your life and believe the Message.’

And the Kingdom is at the heart of Jesus’ message throughout his ministry. And he taught about it and preached about it more than anything else. We see it recurring time and time again in the parables or stories he told.

And so, for example, on one occasion he said the Kingdom is like a precious pearl, the smoothest, purest pearl you’ve ever seen, it’s the last thing in pearls, in fact, it’s so desirable that it’s worth selling everything you have in order for you to obtain that one perfect pearl. It’s worth more than anything for you.

And in another of his stories, he likens the Kingdom to a man, who to his amazement finds some buried treasure in a field and so quickly covers it up again and sells everything he has, absolutely everything to release enough money so that he can buy the field for himself.

And, of course, the point Jesus is making in telling these stories is to show that the Kingdom is something for which we should be ready to give up everything for, because it is so valuable and we can have it here and now.

In fact it’s both now and not yet – In his teaching Jesus sometimes spoke of the Kingdom as a present experience and at others as a future expectation or fulfilment. And so when he says the Kingdom of God is at hand, he’s saying that the Kingdom is breaking into this world now as a present reality. It’s very near now, we can enter it now, we can have Jesus reigning in our lives now, and we can know His presence now. And the future expectation is when King Jesus returns in all his majesty at the end of the age.

And the message is no different today – it’s just the same – if we are to be part of the Kingdom, it means a change of direction, from going our own way, to going God’s way. And that’s what that word ‘repent’ in the text means - and that can be quite challenging.

And so what exactly do we mean by the Kingdom. Well perhaps the simplest way of describing it, is that it’s where Jesus is King. And as we go through the New Testament we see that Jesus is God’s anointed King. In, fact in the book of Revelation he’s described as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

The Kingdom is where Jesus reigns– and that can be within our hearts and lives, it can be in a place. It can be anywhere where God’s will is being done. It’s something we pray for every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer – ‘Your Kingdom come, your will be done.’

And we can see signs of the Kingdom breaking into the present all over the place if we look. When I see people coming to faith in Christ and confessing Jesus as their Lord and King - then I see signs of the Kingdom breaking in to the present. When I see those who are lonely and afraid touched by the presence of God and filled with newness of life - I see signs of the Kingdom. When I see people being set free from the powers of sin and darkness - I see signs of the Kingdom.

I think of a small Christian charity in the Middle East where the few staff are working in the most difficult of conditions. But each one is passionate for Jesus in caring for displaced and traumatized refugees from Iraq and other parts of the Middle East and giving them hope for the future. And as I see what they are doing I see signs of the Kingdom breaking into the present.

‘Your Kingdom Come – Your will be done’ and we can pray that prayer from many different perspectives.

We can pray it generally in the sense of praying for the time when the Kingdom will come in all its fullness at the end of this present age and when, to quote some words from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah: ‘the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.’

We can also pray it into specific situations such as “Lord we pray your Kingdom will come into this difficult situation and into that situation over there” and so on.

And we can pray it on a very personal level as well. This is how one writer puts it: ‘When we pray in the Lord’s prayer, ‘Your Kingdom come, your will be done’ we are saying, amongst other things, “Lord, be king of my body, be king of my mind, be king of my soul, be king of my ambitions....I want your Kingdom to be manifest in me.’

Perhaps I can draw to a close with a wonderful story about a Russian boy who was a Christian. He was ordered by the authorities to go and fight an evil war for Russia and he refused to do it in the name of Christ. He was brought to trial in a court. And when asked why, he said he could not do this under God. And in response, the Judge said: “But my son you are talking of the Kingdom of heaven and this has not come

yet.” The boy replied, “Your honour, it may not have come for you, but it has come for me.”

And may that be our experience too.

Philip Newell (Reader)

Sermon live streamed on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> February 2021