

A sermon preached at St. George's Anglican Church, Calgary, by the Rev. Clara King, November 26, 2017.

Reign of Christ - Year A

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:41-46

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our Strength and our Redeemer. **Amen.***

I want to draw a picture for you, just for a minute: a picture of life under Roman occupation in the Holy Land.

In the time of Jesus, something like 90% of the population lived their whole lives within 3 days of starvation. But this wasn't just an unfortunate natural accident - this situation was manufactured by the Romans in order to keep the population quiet.

You see, the Romans cared about only two things in that part of the world: keeping the population quiet, and reaping a good profit from their taxes. But they had found out that these two things weren't all that easy to achieve amongst this unusually rebellious people. And so the Romans came up with a solution. They kept the food prices artificially high, and crushed the people with taxes they almost couldn't pay.

And so, people lived their whole lives within days of starvation. Just a few days off work were all it took. But living under such harsh conditions, illness was rampant; and since workplaces were often dangerous, injury, infection and disability were all too common. In a world without sick-leave and benefits, illness and injury meant taking days off without pay - and so you can imagine the cycle of inescapable, grinding poverty and struggle that the people lived under. It is thought that Jesus at 33 would have been seen as one of the older men of the community; the average life-span might have been in your early 40s.

Rome's theory was that this hardship kept the people quiet, too worn down by their suffering to have time or energy for rebellion. But Rome didn't take into account three things: the hatred against Rome that simmered in the hearts of the people; their deep and irrepressible longing for freedom and abundance; and the

power of a promise that went back centuries: the promise that one day God would send a Messiah to bring Israel to freedom once again.

Imagine how deeply the people longed for that Messiah to come and free them. Imagine the power of that longing, when Jesus began to minister to the people, healing the sick, liberating the oppressed, giving sight to the blind - wouldn't you hope, with every fibre of your being, that he was the one? And as his ministry continued, kindling the fire in the hearts of his followers, that they would live to see Israel set free, and the yoke of the Roman occupation destroyed? They came to long for it with everything they had.

And when they'd seen his resurrection, then *they were sure*: he was the one, and they'd see it with their own eyes: the Day of Jubilee, the mighty coming of the Lord. And he would throw down their oppressors, and raise up the poor, and peace and harmony and plenty would be theirs, forever. And when he ascended into heaven, he promised: he would not leave them orphaned, but would be with them always; and he sent the Holy Spirit, and they began to see the kingdom emerging in their midst, in prayer and healing and new community - and it was only a matter of time, maybe even a few weeks, and then he would come again, and make it permanent.

Now we look back, two thousand years later, maybe inclined to think them foolish to have thought he would come again so imminently. But it wasn't foolish to them; it was a mark of how deeply they longed for it; and how strong their hope burned for the overturning of the world, and the triumph of the oppressed.

Now imagine what happens when you long for something that deeply, when it is that important, and you thought it would happen soon - but "soon" stretches into years and decades. One of two things happen: you give up hope; or you start figuring out how you can get as close to it as possible.

That was a transformation that happened for that first generation of Christians evangelized by Peter and Paul and the disciples. Some of them had lain idle, waiting for the coming of Christ, but this message was starting to sink in, the message Jesus had left for them, these parables in the 25th chapter of Matthew: prepare for a long wait, and do not be idle.

And if they were wondering what they should be busy with, today we hear his answer. "The righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And

when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the King will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you do it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." [Matt. 25:37-40]. Jesus says to them: "be at work living the kingdom, building the kingdom, mirroring the kingdom on earth, while you wait for it to be real in truth. Live now as if the kingdom is real."

Live now as if the kingdom is real. With these three parables in Matthew 25 that we've been reading over the past few weeks, Jesus leaves us no excuse simply to leave everything up to him. Jesus has given us a vision of the kingdom; why would we wait until later, when we can begin now, living as if it is real.

Jesus' vision of the kingdom isn't a vision of something other-worldly; it is a vision of how people can live their ordinary lives, in the ordinary circumstances of every day. Jesus gave us a dream of the kingdom here, and now. To a community of shepherds, Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is like a shepherd with his sheep." To a community of farmers, Jesus said, "the kingdom of God is like a farmer who went out to sow his seeds." To the slaves and servants he told parables of slaves; to the powerful he told parables of masters and kings.

If Jesus were with us now, he would tell parables of teachers, nurses, bus drivers, cleaners, seniors living in care and the nursing aids who work with them; he'd tell parables of administrators and administrative assistants; he'd tell parables of accountants and engineers and IT techs and librarians and security guards and bankers - and, yes, he'd tell parables of priests, too. And we can guarantee, he'd tell parables of refugees, and the working poor, and those in need.

And his message would be the same now as it was then: this is the vision of the kingdom, a vision of peace, justice, righteousness and plenty for all. There will be no more poverty, there will be no more unjust distribution of wealth, there will be no more inequality. All will live as one with God. And, he'd say to us: if you believe in me, and believe in my vision, then *live that vision now, in the midst of your life.*

May God grant each one of us inspiration, and a clear vision for how to follow his word - in our private lives, in our work and our activities, in our families, and in our congregation. To the glory of his name. **Amen.**