

Devotional Blog

Sunday 26th July

If someone had told you this time last year that you would be going into your bank wearing a mask, or that the Government had banned singing in Church, you might have checked if they'd missed their medication.

Actions that seem as best odd, if not actually counter cultural have become the norm. It is a useful reminder of how for the collective good we have agreed to some very strange requests.

Christianity is often described as topsy-turvy. It turns the values of the world upside down; the first become last, the poor are blessed, and the gentle will take over the earth.

This radical aspect of our faith is easily hidden. Churches and Cathedrals are often seen as tourist attractions; most Christians don't look like revolutionaries; while the Christian faith is branded by the media as quaint, old fashioned, nerdy, and uncool.

So, it is refreshing when a church leader speaks out on a political issue to uphold Christian values, upsetting the politicians of the day and jarring the media image of the church.

It is also helpful for us to get past some of the comfortable familiarity of the Gospel and reconnect with its counter-cultural message.

That powerful message can be found in favourite parables like the mustard seed, the leaven in the bread, the buried treasure, the pearl of great price and the dragnet (Matthew 13: 31-33,44-52).

These parables tell us about the Kingdom of Heaven and traditionally ones like the mustard seed and the leaven of the bread are seen as growth stories. Something tiny becomes big and important. Children

love this sort of story, rather like Jack's beanstalk. It's also comforting when we look around our small church and see ourselves as the small seed ready to grow into a giant tree.

Now, there's nothing wrong in this way of thinking, but we can miss the counter-cultural edge of the parable. The thing is, the mustard seed, proverbially the smallest seed (actually, it's not!) is in fact an invasive plant that farmers must clear, or it will take over a garden or a field. It's a weed! And an amazingly fast growing one at that. So, Jesus is saying that the Kingdom of God is like a weed.

Leaven in Jesus' day was a popular symbol for corruption. It was linked to putrefaction and uncleanness. A woman would search the house for any leaven and burn it all as part of the preparation for Passover.

It's as if Jesus is saying in his parables that the Kingdom of Heaven is like "rust" or even a "virus".

This is not only counter-cultural, but positively subversive!

But what are the parables seeking to subvert? Well, it's the Kingdom of Earth with its war, terror, love of power, desire for wealth and privilege, xenophobia, and racism. A world that stands in sharp contrast to the template of the Sermon on the Mount.

How are we to deal with this earthly kingdom? Well, we are going to corrupt it! We are going to corrupt the corruption.

The Gospels paint a picture of an alternative universe hidden in the midst of our broken world. An alternative that operates by the logic of Christian love. We are part of the Kingdom of Heaven within the Kingdom of Earth, as we live our lives through acts of love, mercy, compassion, and justice.

The Apostle Paul suggests that Christians should not "become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from

the inside out. Readily recognise what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you". (Romans 12:2)

Brothers and Sisters, the world is intolerant of this inner kingdom. It crucifies its messengers, literally and figuratively. But when we live in it, we have the joy, greater than finding any buried treasure or obtaining the greatest pearl ever known.

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