

Repentance & Time

a sermon preached on the

3rd Sunday after Epiphany

Sunday 25 January 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lection: Jonah 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 7:29-31; Mark 1:14-20

The time καιρος (*kairos*) is fulfilled πεπληρωται (*peplērōtai*), and the kingdom of God βασιλεια του Θεου (*basileia tou Theou*) has come near ηγγικεν (*ēngiken*) repent μετανοιετε (*metanoiēte*) and believe πιστευετε (*pisteuete*) the gospel ευαγγελιω (*evangellion*).¹

On this third Sunday after Epiphany we hear of the adult Jesus as he comes to Galilee, having emerged from the temptations in the wilderness. In just 16 words² Jesus sums up the purpose of his mission, the reason for Incarnation. And in fact in that summary when all the connecting words are removed there are just 7 key words: time and fulfilment, kingdom and nearness, repentance, belief and gospel.

The time is fulfilled. I count time according to the seconds, minutes, hours, days and years of my watch and calendar, and I unconsciously assume this is the only kind of time there is. But encounter with the Divine penetrates this outer veneer, revealing time of an altogether different order and shape and texture – not κρονος *chronos*, but καιρος *kairos*. Under the Divine influence, the limitation of *chronos* is transformed by the infinity of *kairos*. As St Paul intuited, “the present form of this world is passing away.”³

This is actually more common and more ‘normal’ than we might at first suppose. Just consider how frequently we talk about the strangeness of time, of time ‘warping’. Consider, too, the nature of memory & time. We speak of time ‘warping’, but we so readily pass over it, just as our attention to most things soon passes as we move on to the next distraction, novelty or duty. However, when we do stop and take notice and attend to the deeper significance of the strangeness we have felt, it becomes apparent that this penetration into our usual world invites us into another time, a world whose values and priorities may be the opposite of that upon which we have staked our reputations, our values, our livelihoods. The purpose of the religious tradition is to help us to stop and attend in this way.

This Divine penetration is an epiphany, a revealing, a being made known, a making visible. This, in biblical language – and presumably the reason why the lectionary gives us this text during these Epiphanytide days – is ‘Jesus coming to Galilee’. Galilee is the ordinary place, the common place, it is wherever I am making my living and living with others. Jesus makes himself known, penetrates my Galilee time and space, according to the uniqueness and the particularity of my circumstances. He may come through liturgy, or through Bible reading, yes. More likely he will come in dreams, visions, nightmares and strange experiences. Indeed, he most commonly comes through illness, accident, moral failure, or even national calamity as today’s reading from Jonah reminds us.

Whatever form his penetration takes, according to the detail of each life, one thing is certain – his being made known, this epiphany, will be confronting, uncomfortable, shattering, explosive. This is very, very important to name, especially since religion is so routinely portrayed as either mere comfort, or as calling down the deity in order to get what I want – *the Divine penetration, epiphany, will feel like a calamity, a crisis*, because his penetration interrupts and interferes with my order of time and space. This is the experience of

¹ Mark 1:15

² The Greek text

³ 1 Corinthians 7:31

the Magi, of Galilean men going about their family fishing business, and countless women and men down the centuries. When the Divine penetrates our time and space we are shocked and appalled and horrified and afraid because this 'other kind of time' is not what we have chosen for ourselves, it is not what we want, not our design. When Jesus comes into our Galilee time is warping, something is being fulfilled which we did not design or invent for ourselves.

Epiphany is this something, which we do not choose for ourselves, coming near: "The kingdom of God has come near." According to Jesus, it is the kingdom which has come near. No longer a something out there, over there, up there, but a something as near as it is possible to be. Nearness in time, space and attitude is the meaning of the word Mark the evangelist employs. In the calamity and the crisis, when time is penetrated, when the Divine-in-Christ comes to our Galilee, the kingdom is no longer merely transcendent, but imminent, as near to us as it is possible to be – as near as a Moses before the burning bush. ⁴

At such a moment we do not need to be convinced about the reality of the kingdom of God. Creeds and texts and moving oratory are superfluous. At such a moment all the disparate fragments of our being seem to be fused into one, yet remaining distinctly separate and multiple. This is the secret of the kingdom of God – that it simultaneously unifies all things, while guaranteeing the multiplicity of things. The kingdom is neither the monolithic homogeneity which political, cultural and economic ideals attempt to impose, nor the rampant individualism of our age which is justified by the notion of 'liberty'. Nearness, not sameness. In spite of the nearness, in spite of the mystery of the Incarnation, the Divine remains 'Other', the Ground of Being, the *Mysterium Tremendum*. The kingdom is as near as is possible, yet not identical – this is indeed a great paradox.

Our life having been derailed, as it seems to us, by the calamity and crisis of the penetrating kingdom of God which is as near as my breath, as near as possible but not identical, it presses me to turn around, to turn away from my own self-constructed mini-kingdom, to turn in the direction of The Kingdom. The gospel's word for this is repentance. It is biblically wrong to reduce this tremendous word to mere morality, though that is surely a sub-set of repentance. "Follow me," Jesus declared to Simon and Andrew. That is, turn around! You are facing in the direction of the agenda you and your father and family and culture and religion have set for you. Turn around, in the direction of the kingdom which is not chosen by you – and which will most likely scandalise others. Mark's narrative is so bare and so tight that we can only imagine the human dimension of the crisis which it must surely have precipitated for them and their families. The Divine has penetrated into their world, ushering in a *kairos* fullness, a time transcending *chronos* limitation which they could never have imagined. And this Divine fullness which has penetrated their world demands that they turn around and face a different direction which is most surely a calamity, a crisis for the first century Palestinian fisherman family.

In short, the manifestation of the Divine which has come to fulfil all things, the Kingdom which is as near as our breath, requires turning around, repentance. This appears from our point of view as an assault on our freedom to choose, a limitation on our goals and aspirations, a threat to our autonomy. From the Divine point of view, this is actually a beckoning us to turn around and turn towards that deeper freedom and truth which is the promise of the gospel. We do we feel assaulted by the Divine penetration, and our calculating minds attempt furiously to work it all out, to rationalise and to formularise. Or we attempt, with Jonah, to run away, to pursue the path of our own choosing, to take control again.

But the call to turn around towards that Divine presence is simultaneously the call to believe that what appears to us to be an assault, a limitation, is actually transformation, *εὐαγγέλιον* *evangelion*, good news, gospel. This is an epiphany, the making known that this is the purpose and mission of the Incarnate infant of Bethlehem – and equally of every one of God's sons and daughters.

The time is fulfilled,
and the kingdom has come near,
repent and believe the gospel.

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