

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday 5th July, 2009

The Kingdom of God On Earth

I have a lurking fear – that one day something amazing is going to happen and I'm either going to miss it, or even worse, I'll actually be right there on the spot and because I'm so full of my own thoughts, and my own life (too busy) I just won't see it, and I won't even hear what's right in front of me.

I imagine like being in Nazareth on the day the preacher came to town – I was astounded, yes, by what he said in church, impressed by his wisdom – and yeah sure, I'd heard about the stunning things he'd done in other places. But then, hey, isn't this the guy I've known from way back?

I mean he's no 'stand out'. Like, isn't he just a skilled labourer? And I've known his family for years – you know? There's his mother Mary, his brothers – James and Joses and Judas and Simon and his sisters – yeah, they're pretty good sorts, but what's the fuss? What's the big deal?

If I'm really going to be honest, who does he think he is?

PAUSE

Terrifying isn't it? Can you imagine having Einstein in your class and writing his report, and saying he'll never amount to much. Or be approached by this weird band called The Beatles (stupid name anyway) and steer them to another record company. Mmmmm.

That's my question and my challenge to myself and to you this morning:

will I recognise the kingdom of God when I see it? Or won't I see it coming when it comes?

Or will it pass me by, will I miss it?

Or, more importantly, do I even want it to come?

Or is it just too confronting? Too difficult to understand?

Just plain too difficult, period?

Example: praying for revival, and almost missing it and not recognising it when it came –

- (1) Praying for revival in Kurnell
- (2) Then the young Bikies' visit
- (3) The revival: Canon Glennan – Darlinghurst
- (4) Catholics, Baptists, nuns, priests, monks – all together cf., my old prejudices against Catholics (cf., as a young Catholic boy: the pagan Protestants)
- (5) Our Psalm of the day was almost the signature song of the revival
- (6) But some not only *didn't* see it, they *wouldn't* see it, and in the end, *couldn't* see it: Capenwray Principal, the mission that sent me to Reunion to cut out all mention of 'preaching, teaching, healing' – which was ironic, as the founder of the mission Dr Andrew Murray knew revival, and the foundation of his teaching was centred around the Holy Spirit and revival, and even he almost missed it when he opposed the revival at its beginnings as it was breaking out amongst the youth

They were amazing times.

I'm glad I didn't miss them, in the end. But I almost did.

In that same revival, in the United States, surfing hippies, tripping out on LSD had visions and encounters with Christ and started streaming into main line churches 'looking for Jesus' much to the stunned perplexity of their parishioners, and the 'Jesus Movement' was born.

But then people tried to 'control' and 'manage' and institutionalise what was happening, and at that very point the movement and the revival began to lose its momentum, and eventually disappeared.

It is said that at Nazareth Jesus could do no deeds of power, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

And it was also said that he was amazed at their unbelief.

I ask myself, and I ask you again this morning:

When we pray 'your kingdom come' do we mean it?

Do we really want the domain of God's power, his rule of justice to break into our comfortable world?

It is my conviction that soon the excuse of an unbelieving world will need to be put aside.

From the signs we are seeing around us, I suggest that we are on the cusp of another revival, and as a believing community we need to prepare for it.

David Tacey's analysis of Australian spirituality indicates that all the signs are there for a significant religious revival in the making, but it will be played out on its own terms, and we need to know what those terms are and prepare for it.

Douglas Coupland, cited by Tacey, initially appears to contradict such a claim: but what he said some fifteen years ago doesn't reflect the realities of our day: *Our culture, he said is stuck in fast forward, our culture appears to be beyond God.* (1994)

In the period since there has been an 'epidemic of meaninglessness in Australian Society. So much so that in 2003, the Federation of Australian Child and Adolescent psychiatrists entitled their Conference that year as 'Finding meaning to sustain life: the role of *spirituality* in suicide prevention.

Do you see it, the word, that according to Coupland, should have died long ago: the word 'spirituality' ?

And do you know why it appeared there? Because it seems, so many children and adolescents were reporting to doctors their lack of meaning and purpose.

Of course it means something else other than what we in the church would want it to mean: 'something beyond the self supporting me' (cf. 'The Third Man Factor' in this weekend's Spectrum); 'spiritual not religious'.

But all the elements are there 'out there' for this community at Holy Covenant to make deep connections. People are looking for the God who is the ground of our being (Tillich). As Manning Clark put it, they're looking for that 'whisper in the mind, and that shy hope in the heart' that has made the cartoonist Leunig so much sought after, because he's tapped into that. Manning Clark also made this insightful comment: *Australians hold the spiritual gently in their hearts, speaking tentatively/hesitantly about it. The spiritual is treated as sacred and the sacred is handled with great care.*

And Les A Murray quaintly says of Australian spirituality, that it's *ordinary mail from the other world, wholly common, not postmarked divine.*

Tacey says that *privately* many have spiritual leanings, but they are not always willing to air them publicly. And he rightly points to the need for

someone to create public discussions and conversations about questions of ultimate meaning, and to create a common language, where people realise that what we in the church are talking about and what people out there are looking for, is one and the same thing.

Max Charlesworth back in 1992, our most revered secular intellectual was saying this:

I have a feeling in my bones that there is the possibility of a creative religious explosion occurring early in the third millenium with the ancient land of Australia at the centre of it.

Are we ready for such a turn of events, and what it will mean for the way we do church? And furthermore are we prepared not only to pray for such a revival, but will be so prepared that we will recognise it when it comes?

That is my challenge to myself predominantly, and to you.

Vaclav Havel wrote this provocative statement in his 'Power of the Powerless' "... To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like a Czech greengrocer who one fine day unbidden took down the sign 'workers of the world unite' from amongst the onions and carrots in his shop window. Those who have ears to hear let them hear.'

Out of this essay and this parable emerged phoenix-like a community called the community of the shaken: a community rising out of the experience of shakenness.

It is a term used in this way for the first time in Czechoslovakia by Jan Patocka who died in March 1977 for his beliefs under interrogation by the secret police. His Chartist 77 movement brought together a diversity of people: Catholics, Protestants, atheists, agnostics, reform-minded ex-Communists, anarchists, social democrats, liberals and conservatives. The only thing uniting such a hotch potch of people was **a common desire and a common experience**: the common desire to discover the truth and the reality and the openness that is to be found beyond the life of lies, and the experience of the solidarity that comes with being shaken by the traumas and injustices of life.

Patocka's response to the experience of suffering in the world by a determined attempt to rethink his whole moral attitude to the world, as it is called into question by those experiences of suffering, appeals deeply to me, as does his call to reconstruct one's life accordingly. And it has for the last five years gestated in me, and now wants to inextricably entwine itself with the vision which God gave me in May.

I see a praying community open to all, children and young people included, bound by our common experience of shakeness: to be among the shaken is to have responded to grimly disturbing circumstances, and to create a solidarity.

The remarkable experience of praying with a Muslim in the United States; the remarkable experience of being in the Great Hall at Sydney University where those who had suffered loss of loved ones through cancer met to share their common grief.

In my daily meditation Diary I wrote this on Friday 22nd May 2009:

*I have a vision, that Holy Covenant should be host to **an inclusive community of prayer and worship** on a 24hour a day cycle, which would include intercessory prayer for the world and the Church, and that from this circle of prayer will emerge great projects of faith:*

artistic, charitable, and liturgical.

I look to you to help me translate that vision into practice. And to pray for revival, of which I believe our Men's Retreat this weekend was the beginning.

If the Sacred Text is correct, the world as we know it is in for a shaking, such a shaking as we have never seen in the history of humanity. And when the shaking has stopped little will be left standing except faith hope and love. And in the midst of those wonderful qualities, The community of prayer.

Merton's Prayer: Antiphon and Psalm pp.126-128

Prayer for Courage from John O'Donohue.