

St Luke's Day sermon

Preached at Coventry Cathedral 18th October 2020

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Jesus, anointed by the Spirit at his baptism and driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, now returns to Galilee. He goes to the synagogue in Nazareth, his home town, and is handed the long scroll of Isaiah. He chooses two verses. He proclaims them, he owns them, he fulfils them. This is his calling and mandate. This is our calling and mandate.

The sphere of the breaking in of the kingdom of God – where the rubber hits the road – is the sphere of poverty, of captivity, of oppression, in short, of need. This is where God meets us. Not in the sphere of pride or complacency, not in the place of self-sufficiency.

God comes, God releases, God heals, God blesses those who know their need of God. God meets us in our incompleteness. Those words from Isaiah, claimed and fulfilled by Jesus are sometimes called the manifesto of the Kingdom. In similar vein the *Beatitudes* are seen as the bedrock, the core teaching of Jesus. Jesus calls blessed those who know their need of God, those who weep, those who live in humility, those who seek to make or build peace, those struggling for justice in an unjust world, those persecuted for the Gospel's sake (and there are so many of them in today's world). God, our God, meets us in our need, in our incompleteness.

Jesus says those who are well have no need of a doctor.

Mary proclaims joyfully the God who lifts up the lowly and brings down the might from their seats. God promises through Ezekiel 'I will bring down the tall tree and raise up the low tree'. This is the revolution of the Kingdom, turning upside down the value -systems and hierarchies of the world.

R.S. Thomas captures this kingdom revolution beautifully in his poem *The Kingdom*:

'Here there are different things going on. Festivals at which the poor man is king and the consumptive is healed. Mirrors in which the blind look at

themselves and love looks at them back, and industry is for mending the bent bones and the minds fractured by life.

It's a long way off, but to get there takes no time and admission is free ... if you present yourself **with your need only** and the simple offering of your faith, green as a leaf.'

'With your need only', this is the gateway to the Kingdom. Blessed are those who know their need of God.

I had the privilege of meeting Ken Leech, an extraordinary prophet priest and theologian, when he came to this Diocese in the early 80s. His words have remained with me and are worth pondering. He said 'Theology begins where the pain is'. The locus and focus of our encounter with God and our understanding of God is forged in the place of our incompleteness, our struggle, our pain. This is where God meets us.

So what ground do we inhabit today? Is it the comfortable safe ground of self-sufficiency, of satisfaction, of spiritual slumber? In Luke's Gospel following the blessings of the beatitudes, Jesus warns of such a state, 'Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are drawing all your satisfaction from this world, woe to you if your goal is popularity.'

Or do we live in the ground of godly insecurity, i.e. knowing our only security is in God, knowing our need? Because it is the *desert* that will rejoice and blossom.

I read some poignant and pertinent words of *Rabbi Moshe Hakotan*:

'The praises of the sick and the broken excuse the silence of the healthy and the whole.'

Those who are well, says Jesus, have no need of a doctor.

The pandemic, with all the suffering it is bringing, is awakening in not a few in the relatively comfortable west, a sense of insecurity that is prompting people to seek God.

Because all of us need at times the disturbance of God, to wake us out of our shallow securities and all of us need the comfort and strength of God to meet us in our insecurities.

Many years ago, when I was a parish priest, I was leading worship in a Parish Communion service. In the middle of the service during the offertory hymn,

someone very disheveled came into the Church and staggered up the aisle to speak to me. She was, in a sense, quite a disturbing presence, you could sense ripples of disturbance across the congregation. She told me, God had told her in a dream to come to this church and she did. Her life was clearly in a mess. Long story short, she came to see me and started to come to church. Later she was confirmed and played a part in our healing ministry. I sensed God had indeed sent her to us, she witnessed to what the gospel is all about. Christ visited us and disturbed us in her and through her. This disturbance was a gift. God brought strength, comfort and significant healing to her, and subsequently to others through her.

God brings water to the desert places. Out there in the world around us and 'in here' in the world within us. This is God's promise.

'The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.' Is.35.1.

John Stroyan.