

Sermon on Matthew 10: 1-14

Life, Love, and Imagination: the Joys and Sorrows of Being a Congregation

Perhaps the hardest thing to grasp as Christians is that when we think about what is true and real, we begin from the God's eye perspective.

And the revelation of Jesus Christ is at the core of the God's eye perspective.

Let me give you an example of what I mean...

Think about a King and a Kingdom.

Now we would all have an idea in our minds of what a King is...if we were asked to describe it, there would be a number of things we could say...we could think of any number of historical kings and give some kind of account of what they were like.

But Jesus shows us a different kind of Kingship...a kingship whose rule is marked by suffering and service, not violence and terror, by grace and forgiveness, not punishment and vindictiveness, by gentleness and peace, not force and power.

And what we tend to think is that the way Jesus is confronts the way the world is...and this is of course true in one sense...

But we too often begin with the wrong assumption.

We too often see things from the worldly point of view and then think Jesus tries to change it...when in fact Jesus shows us, Jesus is what's true in the first place, and the world has fallen away.

The truth about Kingship is seen in Jesus, and it is in comparison to him that all earthly kings might be judged.

I'm guessing this is why Paul says that the authority of earthly rulers is derived from God's own authority...not the divine right of Kings, but rather that Kings have a divine model to live up to.

That their reign only has authority as it reflects the reign of the Kings of Kings, and his kingdom of mercy and love.

So, this is a hard business – seeing as through the eyes of faith – seeing rightly, seeing that what is really true is of God and all else is judged according to that.

Take the congregation, for instance – the church. From the beginning Christians have met together regularly in greater or lesser numbers to worship God and re-

imagine how the Kingdom is becoming manifest in any particular corner of the world: to love and support each other, to commend Christ, and to work for the promotion of human dignity and flourishing in every way.

It started all the way back with the disciples as we've heard today – Jesus sent out the twelve, we're told, to proclaim a simple message – the Kingdom of heaven has come near.

Heal the sick, he said, raise the dead, drive out demons. Freely you have received, so freely give.

We stand in earshot of that same calling.

We come together weekly to sing and share, to pray and practise our faith, and to imagine how our church can reflect to the community around, what God is up to in our neighbourhood.

And we go out to the lost sheep of the world with a message of love and reconciliation.

But the congregation is more than a volunteer organisation.

I regularly hear people say things like, 'You guys do great things in the community.'

They tend to say it as if the church is simply another organisation alongside Rotary or Lions...and I always want to say NO!

The church is the eschatological community on earth... the earthly company of heaven.

Who gather around word and table, bound into the one true Lord of heaven and earth, fired by the Spirit, exercising and living by God's grace.

And while Calvin distinguished between the visible and invisible church (the invisible being the divine communion of eternity, the visible being the broken reality seeking to approximate it, the church is still the people who are called to the truth.

Called to embody the truth of Jesus in word and deed and this is a wholly unique thing.

Barbara Brown Taylor, American preacher and author once wrote that, 'faith is an imaginative act, but the Bible reminds us we are not free to imagine anything we like.'

The Bible challenges us with what is really true and what is truly real.

It confronts us with what is actually important.

And it confronts us with the obvious question, ‘if this is really true, if Jesus really is alive and the Kingdom is in your midst and the world is a hurting and fragile place, what are you going to do about it?’.

‘The church’s central task’, writes Taylor again, ‘is an imaginative one.’

Can we imagine what God’s new world might look like here, now, in this place and time?

Can we imagine from the truth of things, the heart of God, and then work our way outwards?

The congregation is the concrete response of the faithful to this question in a particular place.

Being a congregation of Christ is one group of believers’ imaginative response to what God has set before us, and done for us in Christ.

With all the messiness and unpredictability of life, we seek to love one another and the world and be faithful disciples.

This is no small thing.

It is a glorious and wonderful thing.

No small task.

It requires of us great faith and great belief that God can actually do a new thing right here.

It requires great imagination and courage.

If we are serious about this way of life into which we are called, being a congregation with all its joys and sorrows, is who we are meant to be.

An example...

At one of my placement churches at college there was a small afternoon congregation which included a number of people with serious mental illness.

The service began each week with the same call and response.

The leader would say, 'God is good all the time.', and the response was, 'All the time God is good.'

It just set the scene in a pretty marginalised little group to say here the beloved of God are gathered.

There was an old fellow called Richard.

I'm not sure how much he took in of what was going on, but each week he would make the same gesture of greeting, 'Hello Michael' in his low gruff voice.

That was it.

Just a small little hello before the worship began.

Yet he said it as if it was part of what made his day and his faith make sense.

It was his 'way into' the community, his way into the congregation of the faithful in that place.

His greeting was his calling card of faith.

His personal touch.

And not just with me of course, but with the others who were a part of that little community as well.

Richard is someone who sticks in my mind as to the joy of congregational life and the imaginative task of being a congregation together.

My hunch is that there were no other places or communities where Richard knew the kind of love and support he knew there. In that little church Richard was at the centre of things.

He was an important man.

His greeting was a faithful pattern of his expression of faith and he never missed it week to week.

The hospitality of Christ, expressed in the hospitality of the congregation brought a joy into his world, and he brought a joy into theirs.

It was a part of how they imagined their vocation together.

Where else is it possible that when you walk through those doors, those front doors of the church, whether you've been here 50 minutes or 50 years, whether you're old or young in faith, however different or fragile or burdened or struggling you perceive yourself to be, you are as much at the centre of things as anyone else?

As much beloved of God, as much called to embrace Christ and his way of sacrificial love?

This is the miracle of the church.

This is why the congregation is the only game in town.

American Pastor from the Congregational tradition Martin Copenhaver said this: "...to me the affirmation that God can be found outside the church has never seemed like

much of a claim. The true wonder is that God can be found inside the church, among quirky, flawed, and broken people who may have little in common and yet are bound to one another.”

Richard and that congregation represented the imaginative re-ordering of God’s Kingdom made concrete.

They were a part of him, and he was a part of them, and God was a part of it all.

Of course sorrow can be a part of congregational life as much as joy.

This is particularly so when faithful members are lost, or some tragedy descends upon people.

The community is never quite the same again.

Sorrow is also something which can become palpable if there’s unnecessary conflict and a stubborn unwillingness to forgive each other, to live with each other, and love each other.

Congregations show the real mettle of their commitment and how deeply the Kingdom has really taken hold in such times.

It is far easier to hold grudges and let little frustrations simmer and boil.

The hard work of forgiveness and reconciliation, often more associated with broader social and political issues, are as crucial at the heart of a congregation's life.

And for us each individually in our relationships with one another.

On rare occasions there may be large issues to deal with, but more often than not forgiving each other is simply a pattern of being and living which congregations are called into.

It's how a congregation goes on seeking the Gospel in its midst.

It will never be perfect.

There will always be struggle and heartache.

The Gospels are full of it.

The question is can a congregation's re-imagining of its own life in Christ win through over the things which would pull it down?

Sometimes joy can be born out of sorrow such is the amazing grace of God.

It's all a part of what we seek to be week to week in our common life together, a people of forgiveness and reconciliation; a people constantly seeking to come together even amid those things which might threaten to tear us apart.

Our Gospel reading today reminds us that the imaginative task of the congregation doesn't finish at the limits of the church's internal life.

We are to be attentive to where God is calling us into our community and the world at large.

The disciples are sent out with next to nothing and charged with healing, and saving, and sharing.

The internal and external engagement of a church must be intertwined.

You can't have one without the other and expect that something approaching the fullness of the Gospel is being proclaimed.

The church exists for the sake of the world at large, and while throughout Christian history there has been an ongoing dialogue regarding the level of engagement,

sharing our faith in word and deed must be at the heart of a congregation's life.

Here in Bowral/Mittagong, in imagining our congregation's response to the revelation of the Kingdom among us, we engage the world in different ways...

There's always more to do, more to share.

We invite people in and we go out beyond the bounds of our church with our faith firmly in hand.

We seek to make our town, our community and society a better place, a more merciful place, to remind it that it too is captured in the new world vision of God and we are trying to imagine ways to encourage it to see and embrace such a vision.

To accept what is really true, and truly real, the KOG revealed in Jesus.

In Jesus' day the disciples' mission was first to Israel, but pretty soon it would spread out to the Gentile world too.

In our little part of the world we remain a part of that ever going out of the Gospel.

We must play our part.

I'll close with a little story from history.

St Patrick...

Amen.