

Reflection for Wednesday July 8

Collect for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

O God,
you have prepared for those who love you
such good things as pass our understanding:
pour into our hearts such love toward you,
that, loving you above all things,
we may obtain your promises which exceed all that we can desire;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Matthew 10.1-7

Then Jesus summoned his twelve disciples and gave them authority over unclean spirits, to cast them out, and to cure every disease and every sickness. These are the names of the twelve apostles: first, Simon, also known as Peter, and his brother Andrew; James son of Zebedee, and his brother John; Philip and Bartholomew; Thomas and Matthew the tax collector; James son of Alphaeus, and Thaddaeus; Simon the Cananaean, and Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed him.

These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The kingdom of heaven has come near.’”

Reflection

One of my heroes is Paula Gooder. Paula is a British theologian and Anglican lay reader, who specialises in the New Testament. She is Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral and I had the great pleasure of having dinner with her last year. Paula has written lots of wonderful books and if you look her up on YouTube you will find many fascinating videos of her talking about different aspects of Christian faith.

One of Paula's books, that I highly recommend is called *Heaven*. Speaking about writing it she says that a typical view of heaven is that it is where I, and probably you, though almost certainly not they, will go when I die. Although this is a popular view of heaven, it is not, in fact, a Biblical view. Paula argues that popular culture has *privatized and postponed* heaven in a way that the Biblical writers would never have imagined.

Paula argues that, as distinct from the popular view of heaven as a place far away where people go when they die, the Bible presents a picture of heaven as the place where God dwells right now, in order to be as close as possible to humanity. If we translate the Biblical view of heaven into the twenty-first century, we might think of it as a parallel universe, where God dwells right beside us, in the midst of our lives.

This is a view that might help us to hear the Gospel reading set for today in a startling, fresh way, as Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus begins his earthly ministry by declaring that, the kingdom of heaven has come near (Matthew 4:17). This is not the privatized, postponed place of popular

imagination, but the immediate reality of the place where God dwells. Through Jesus, God's realm has become a reality on earth in a new way. Jesus opens for humanity, in the way the ancient Celts imagined, a *thin place*, a communication between God and humanity. This is not the stuff of angels playing harps on clouds, but of God's rule of justice and peace being realized on earth. Through God's action in sending Jesus into the world, the kingdom of heaven has come near; it has come to this world.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his followers about the kinds of people who live in the kingdom of heaven. They are not the kinds of people we might expect. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 5:3,10).

In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus teaches his disciples to pray, *Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* (Matthew 6:9-10). God wants us to work to bring God's kingdom to reality in our world. This is not a dream of pie in the sky when you die, but a practical teaching that calls us to work for justice, dignity, peace, hope and life for God's good creation, right here, right now.

Matthew's Gospel finishes with Jesus commissioning his disciples and giving them authority to teach everyone the good news that the kingdom of heaven has come near. He is about to return to God his heavenly Father but he still promises that he will be with them, *always, to the end of the age* (Matthew 28:19-20). Once again, we can hear that Jesus, returning to dwell with God, remains very close to us, intimately involved with our lives.

Of course we know that although the kingdom of heaven has come near, earthly kingdoms and powers, with their disregard for God's rule, continue to dictate much of our lives. Matthew is clear that God's kingdom is not fully realized on earth as we know it. We pray and wait for the time when God's realm will be complete on earth as it is in heaven. But in the meantime, we live by God's values in a way that makes God's kingdom real amongst us and spreads the good news of God's presence with us and of God's loving concern for us and for all creation.

Just as it seems strange to us that the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness, perhaps the things that we struggle with as we prepare once again to become distant from each other and return to lockdown, can, through God's grace, become a source of God's blessing for us. Even in our isolation, the kingdom of heaven has come near. This is good news indeed.

Amen.