



Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 21 February 2021

Readings: Mark 1.9-15; Genesis 9.8-17; I Peter 3.12-22

When things change dramatically, we sometimes hear people describe it as being like the movement of the earth's tectonic plates. For over three billion years there has been movement between the various sections of the earth's outermost shell. Relative to the rest of the planet, this crust is thin – think the depth of the skin on an apple in relation to the bulk of the rest of the fruit. But as these bits of the crust move, they sometimes collide with such significant power that mountains are formed, volcanoes and earthquakes occur.

It's little surprise then, that when the world is passing through traumatic episodes, the tectonic plate metaphor gets used. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic, the effects of the climate emergency, the radical debates of global politics, and the place of the Church in Western Europe and North America, can all feel as if something fundamental is changing beneath our feet. At such times, many people look to philosophy and religion for a word of hope. One of the Psalms is perhaps the classical example:

'I lift my eyes to the hills;
from whence cometh my help?' (121.1)

Reading today's Bible passages nourished me in my hunger for hope, and especially Mark chapter one, verse fifteen: 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.'

The big idea there is *the Kingdom of God*. It's one of the phrases we use all the time, indeed, it's the very first thing for which we ask every time we say the Lord's Prayer: 'Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, *thy kingdom come*'. For what, then, do we think we are praying?

We often conceive of a kingdom as the area ruled over by a monarch. Their country, or more expansively, their empire. Too easily, then, we lapse into conceiving of the Kingdom of God as a place – often heaven, somewhere spatially distanced, far removed from us. Not only does that make it remote, even irrelevant to us, it robs the Kingdom of God of some of its meaning and immediacy. I am helped by the thought that the Kingdom of God is not a place 'out there' for life in which Jesus was preparing us one day in the future but something that is happening here and now. N. T. Wright puts it like this: 'God's Kingdom ... is about something that was happening in and on this earth, through [Jesus'] work, then through his death and resurrection, and then through the Spirit-led work to which [his followers] would be called.' (*Surprised by Hope* 2005 page 215)

So the Kingdom of God is a way to speak of the difference it makes when we yield to God's reign in our world and in our lives - when we engage with Jesus's teaching and let it shape

- how we order society, with evil and justice out in their proper places,
- how we behave ethically in the workplace,
- how we engage in God's work as the Church
- how we *speak to one another* in the Church,
- how we relate in the intimacies of sharing a home,

- and, yes, how we face death.

All that and so much more is what it means to live within God's reign.

There is another phrase in Mark 1.15 which matters. 'The Kingdom of God *has come near*.' What does that little triplet mean – 'has come near'?

All the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, together with Acts – want us to get the point that the reign of God – 'the dawn from on high' - has already begun, as Jesus came amongst us. Yet, God's reign has not finally arrived. So, 'has come near' is not only to do with the future because it's begun, yet it is far from complete, as the shifting tectonic plates under our feet make very clear. When Mark says the Kingdom of God has come near, he uses the word ηγγικεν, in the perfect tense, signalling a past act that endures in the present. It's not easy to put the perfect tense into snappy English, but perhaps Isaac Watts got it right when he wrote, 'Joy to the world, *the Lord is come*.' It happened and it's happening.

The same perfect tense verb appears elsewhere in the New Testament. In Luke 21, ηγγικεν refers to the encirclement of a city during a siege, but the city has not yet fallen. And in Romans 13, the words with which our service began this morning, it occurs again. 'The night is far gone, the day is near.' As one commentator puts it: 'the new day is not yet here, but neither is it simply sometime during the night' And he goes on: "first light" calls for living in terms of the dawning day rather than [of] the past darkness.' *Mark: a commentary* Boring 2006 page 51

Now we're getting somewhere! As we live through this era of such change and uncertainty, Mark 1.15 is a profound word of hope

- because it is about the reign of God in the 'here and now', and not just in the 'there and then';
- because it is calling us to yield to that reign so that our lives embody its characteristics and virtues; and
- because it orientates us to the future rather than the past.

God's reign is forever bursting in upon us; it points us to a new tomorrow, pursuit of which is the driving force of all who live as followers of Jesus Christ.

And what is at the heart of *how* we live within God's reign? Well, Mark 1.15 ends by telling us. Repent and believe.

On this first Sunday of Lent, repentance is rightly a key theme. We tend to think of it as confessing our sins. And so we should. That's a part of repentance. But repentance is more nuanced than mere breast beating because we're such wicked people. For me, repentance is about turning to face God, rather than living facing what is *not* of God. We're shaped by the influences to which we expose ourselves. So if we watch dark stuff on the screen, we'll become affected by it. Our world view, our priorities, our hopes become distorted. Conversely, if we focus upon the God of the Bible, we will be infected by the glorious idea of God being in covenant with us. As Noah heard God say after the flood: 'I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh.' Repentance is turning our lives round, so to face God that we might become clay moulded by the divine potter, with

hallmarks of the Holy Spirit's influence: love, joy and peace, patience kindness and goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Such it is to live within God's reign.

Mark 1.15 also says that our response to God's reign drawing near is to believe. The epistle reading suggests that believing is less about unthinking adherence to certain dogmas and more about 'sanctifying Jesus as Lord'. It's not so much that we make Jesus holy, as that we acknowledge and reverence him for being the holy One of God – that one through whom God comes to live out the reign of truth in place of lies, of grace instead of punishment, of radical love instead of callous indifference. And one of the ways we acknowledge Jesus as Lord is by being ready to speak of him when the opportunity arises – to give what I Peter calls 'an account of the hope that is in you'. A local church has that 'giving an account of hope' as one of its purposes. We do not exist simply to keep the good news of God's reign a secret, but to proclaim it in our words, in our actions, and in our conversations. To be frank, few of us find that talking about our faith is easy. We feel tongue-tied or uncertain or more ready to listen than to speak. Moreover, many of us are part of the church less because of how confidently we believe but looking for help to believe at all. We like the idea of believing, but find it quite a hill to climb. Help is at hand. This coming week, Simone Maghenzani, Peter Sarkies and Janet Tollington are enabling us to experiment with a new opportunity to talk about faith. It's called 'A place ,,,, for curiosity', and is designed to explore personal perspectives on what it means to be a Christian in the 21st Century. Somewhere at the core of its purpose is encouraging us to grow in capacity and willingness to give an account of the hope that is in us. It's a conversation on Zoom on Wednesday 24th, at 6.00pm. Please go to the website or ring the office for details.

Repent, believe ... If we had read on a few verses we would have found Jesus calling some fishermen to follow him. For me that is the logical, the irresistible corollary to repenting and believing. We turn to face God as God is in Jesus, we acknowledge Jesus as Lord, and we follow him in faithful service – and that's the bit where we so join God in God's inaugurated-but-not-yet-complete mission that we embody the prayer, 'thy kingdom come.'

Jesus said, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, believe in the good news, and follow me.' It's a word not to stop the tectonic plates shifting, but to inspire us for how to live in difference-making hope as they do.