

20 Cry for the Kingdom

17: 1 – 18: 8

Jesus knew that his disciples would be tempted. He had gathered and chosen and led them, teaching them and encouraging them as if they were his own little ones. But the pull of money is strong, and he knew that people would come and put it to them that money was not altogether so bad, that it was necessary after all, that they had to be practical, that much good could be done with money, that in any case, the world was so constituted that they had to make compromises with money; that, since the decisions of money would nearly always carry the day, they should be in a position to make those decisions, if they wanted to have any influence on the world. Besides which, money would bring them so many little comforts ...

Temptation would come, the message would be watered down and his disciples would stumble – it couldn't be avoided, but woe to that voice thru whom the temptation came. Woe to the person who caused a disciple to go astray! It would be better for such a person to have a millstone tied around their neck and be thrown into the sea. A hard judgement, but it is a terrible thing to destroy the faith of one who is learning to trust in God.

There was not much time left for teaching and what there is now comes with a sense of urgency: things will go wrong, people will let them down, but they are to forgive everything. "If your brother sins against you," Jesus told them "forgive him. Even if he sins against you seven times in a day, forgive him every time."

If you have the tiniest bit of faith, you will be able to say to this sycamore tree: "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", and it will obey you. But they are to remember the faith of the centurion: that it is the faith of obedience. When they have done all that their faith enables them to do, they are to set it all down as no more than their duty. They are servants, and servants are supposed to serve their masters. This time, Jesus gives the picture of a normal master. When his servants come back from a day's work in the fields, he doesn't say to them "Come in, sit down and put your feet up!" No, he says, "Make yourselves busy. Get my dinner ready and wait on me. After that you can eat. "

It's another example of Jesus not being squeamish about where he gets his images. He had earlier given the picture of a most unusual master behaving in an unmasterly way, to convey the generosity of God. Now he uses the

picture of the master you would expect. In each case he is showing us a pattern of behavior which may open our eyes something he wants to teach us about God's behavior or our behavior. He is not making arguments from analogy: "This we know is good behavior, therefore it is the way God will behave, or the way we should behave." He is using pictures from a lively and shared experience to alert us, to surprise us, to make us see and grasp something important about our behavior.

Jesus was still on his way to Jerusalem. He was passing thru the borderlands between Galilee and Samaria when he met a group of lepers, ten of them. Keeping their distance, they called out to him: "Jesus, Master, have pity on us." He replied, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." (This was the correct procedure under the Law of Moses. If a leper believed himself to be cured, they were to go to the priest for examination, and the priest would declare if they were truly cured.¹) As they were on their way to the priests, they were healed, and one of them turned back, shouting praises to God. He returned to Jesus, threw himself at his feet, and thanked him. This man was a Samaritan. Jesus remarked: "Weren't all ten healed? Where are the other nine? Was there no one to come back and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he sed to the Samaritan, "Get up and go on your way. Your faith has healed you."

We have been reminded that faith is a matter of obedience. Now we are reminded that it is a relationship and a lively response to the generosity of God. Ten were healed, but it is this one who came back with praise and thanks, who hears from Jesus: "Your faith has healed you." Faith is not just a price we pay so that God will do what we want. It is a lasting relationship with God.

Some Pharisees asked him, "When will the kingdom of God come?" Perhaps they did not believe but wanted to. They wanted something definite to latch on to, a timetable perhaps. But it won't be like that. Jesus tells them that the kingdom won't be liable to location and measurement. You won't be able to go out with an observation party and say "There it is! Over there!" The kingdom of God, sed Jesus, is among you.

Or else he sed: "The kingdom of God is within you." The Greek word "entos" could mean either "among" or "within", and it has been translated both ways. "The kingdom of God is within you" became a key text for individualistic versions of Christianity, and fitted well with the idea that Jesus spoke only of a private, inner reality of the soul corresponding to a

¹ Leviticus 14: 2 ff

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purely individual salvation in a transcendent kingdom somewhere else. But I think we have heard enuf from Luke by now to realise that it is no such thing. Yes, the kingdom requires an inner change of heart and a conviction from the heart, but that inner reality is immediately expressed in outward changes that have their effect on social status, influence in the community, property and national identity. These are the issues that caused such conflict between Jesus and the rulers. They have as much to do with your bank account as with your private thoughts, with your city and with your country as with your own “state of grace”.

On the other hand, Jesus has emphasised the inner reality, particularly in his criticism of the Pharisees. When the Pharisees ridiculed his teaching because it rejected the claims of money, he had warned them, “God knows your hearts.” It could be sed that the Pharisees were unable to spot the kingdom of God, because they were unwilling to look for it within. But that unwillingness for inner change pitted them against an external and public movement. I believe that Luke reported this saying using this Greek word because he was not aware of any particular opposition between “among” and “within”. In fact, it has taken a long history of European individualism to establish that opposition and to give to Jesus’ saying two contrasting meanings.

Neither Luke nor Jesus shared our sense of opposition between the private individual and the community, and it’s our sense that is faulted. We are all of us our inner selves, hidden tho it may be, from and thru the matrix of our relationships with others.² Our inner life is itself created of a continuous interaction with others. And the outer, the community, is the embodiment in many kinds of relationships, direct or constructed, of the heart that is within us. Neither Jesus nor Luke even considers the possibility of a kingdom within which is not a sharing on thru the community, and in this context, it is impossible to separate “within” from “among”. If it is inside your hearts, it is running thru your community; if it is running thru your community, it will engage in your own heart, or you will be at war with your community.

It seems to me that proof of this is to be found even in our supposedly totally individualistic society. In America and Europe, after all due worship is paid to the ideal of the individual, most individuals remain fiercely patriotic. We have not really got rid of the community dimension of our inner selves; we have just focused it more exclusively on the nation-state, as patriotic loyalty. What American, tho a child of the land of the individual, is

² cf The Warrior God ch 3

not fiercely attached to America and all its symbols, its flag, its anthems, its statue of liberty? Or look at the Olympic Games. Spectator sports, climaxing in international competition, are made to celebrate the nation, with national anthem and all, as if the individual champion can only be so as champion for their country. Our inner life, with its dreams and enthusiasms is lived out in the public sphere.

Jesus is telling the Pharisees that the kingdom of God is there among them. It is there in the hearts, the lives and the community of those who have welcomed it. If it is really within us, it will be among us, and if it is really among us it will be within us. Its coming is not a single one-off event for which we are still waiting. It has begun to come. It is already among us, and the challenge is to recognise it, which we won't do if we are not prepared to live in it.

Is the kingdom then optional? Not really. We can refuse our part in it, but we can't stop it happening. The Day of the Son of Man will come, the day of God's judgement, when the project is complete and the rule of God is established. And thereafter an eternity of days when the world is alive and at peace under the rule of God. But that is not the immediate future. Jesus warned his disciples that there would come a time when they would long to experience just one day of the rule of the Son of Man, but would not find it. That's when the temptation would come, people declaring "Here it is!" or "It's happening over there", or such-and-such is the date, and such-and-such the location. We are not to take any notice, for when the Son of Man appears on the day that is to be, it will be like lightning that lites up the whole sky in one instant. We won't need to be told where it is.

Thruout the ages there have been visionaries and false prophets who have boldly named the day. And they have had their followers, for we are impatient, and we grow tired of the tasks God is giving us, of the slow growth of the kingdom and the pain and labor that that causes us. We get tired of a seemingly endless postponement, forgetting that an event for which no date has been given cannot be postponed. Above all, when we deny that the kingdom of God has work to achieve in the people and the nations of our stretch of history, we itch for something to fill the gap, for God to come and make a new history now. Christianity that creates a secular world and excludes from the work of God the social, the civic, the political, the economic, soon gets bored with what is left and obsessed with the thought that it must be over soon.

Jesus knew that before the Son of Man could rule in triumph, he must suffer. He must endure the present time and the present generation, its

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rejection and the pain it could inflict upon him. There was nothing escapist about Jesus' vision of the coming of the Son of Man. For himself, he knew that suffering awaited him in Jerusalem. The conflict was palpable. In human, political terms the power was all against him, and he was going to the very "polis" itself, the city of his people and the power base of those who opposed him.

The "Son of Man" is, of course, Jesus himself coming in glory when the project is completed. But it is probable that Jesus only came to see this over the course of his ministry. As we saw, there were times when he spoke of the "Son of Man" as of another, a figure of the future recognised from the Jewish scriptures as central to the final intervention and judgement of God;³ but sometimes he spoke of himself as the "son of man".⁴ Jesus was learning, and as he approached the end, it became clearer to him that this was the course of the Son of Man, and that he himself would fulfil that role, even as he discovered the darkness, the pain and the failure of it.

When the day of the Son of Man comes, people will be unprepared for it. Like the day when Noah went into the ark, or the day when Lot departed from Sodom, they will be living their lives, managing their investments, building and expanding, marrying, shopping, celebrating. And because they have no idea what is happening, it will destroy them. In the crisis that is then upon us there will be no time for protecting our own interests, for running to collect our most precious possessions. "When that day comes, if you're up on the roof, don't go down to get your things; if you're out in the fields don't attempt to go back home. If you try to save your life you will lose it; if you're willing to lose your life, you will save it. When the moment comes, two will be sleeping together in one bed: one will be taken and the other left; two women will be grinding corn together: one will be taken and the other left."

The disciples wondered whether Jesus, who was not telling them when, might at least tell them where it is all to take place. But there is no need to predetermine that either. When the time comes, the faithful would know where to gather. When a body lies dead and ready for carrion, the vultures just know where to gather. (Once again, Jesus is not fussed about where he gets his images, as long as they make the point.)

It all sounds very confusing, and that's because it is confusing. It's not something you can map out in advance; you just have to accept that when it

³ e.g. Luke 18: 8

⁴ e.g. Luke 18: 31 - 33

happens it will happen suddenly and the only suitable preparation is to be ready always for the unexpected. The only time to put in your diary is any time. The only way to protect yourself is to accept that you cannot protect yourself. Jesus is describing a multi-dimensional reality that has its full effect even before it is fully or finally present. He will encounter that reality in Jerusalem, where he will die. His disciples will encounter it in their lifetime, as they continue to serve as stewards and messengers, obeying God as he has taught them. When Luke writes, two or maybe three generations later, he is aware that his hearers will experience in their history what Jesus has spoken of. And we, perhaps a longer time afterwards than Luke could have imagined, will experience the fulfilment of Jesus' words in our time. And yet, who knows what generations are still to come, still to discover the truth of all that Jesus foretold?

Jesus did not leave us some startling predictions that could do no more than tease the imaginations of all but the last generation, a minimum of two thousand years in the future. All those who are tempted to draw predictions from the bible to identify our own times as uniquely the "last days" before the "second coming of Christ" have to be reminded that Jesus' description of the days to come has been fulfilled in all the ages since. From the day of his encounter with the rulers in Jerusalem, history has taken a new and final direction, and the kingdom of God is encountered in the terror and the glory of the crisis that broke then and is still with us. That warning of urgency, that call to readiness, was not a bluff. It would be vindicated in the next few weeks. It would be vindicated in the coming career of his disciples. It has been vindicated in every generation since.

There is another dimension to the coming crisis. It is, after all, the coming judgement of God, which, though it might be dreaded by some, is passionately longed for by others. For the persecuted and the oppressed who suffer injustice, the judgement cannot come too soon. Day and night they cry out to God for rescue, for freedom, for justice, and will God not hear them? Will he always be holding back his hand?

Jesus told another parable:

There was a magistrate in a certain town, who neither feared God nor respected human beings. There was a widow in the town, who kept coming to him with the plea, "Hear my case against my opponent and give me justice." For a long time he refused her request [This was a common experience. Corrupt officials could deny justice to the weak, even when they had a cast-iron case, by coming up with excuses for not hearing it. Nowadays, the delaying tactics are more sophisticated

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and institutional.] but in the end he said to himself: “I don’t give a damn for God or for human rights, but this widow is giving me so much grief I’ll have to hear her case, or she will pester me to death.”

If it’s like that with a corrupt magistrate, don’t you think God will act when his people cry out to him night and day for justice? I promise you, God will see justice done, and done speedily: but when the Son of Man comes, will he find any faithful ones crying out to him?

(18: 2 – 8)

The cry for justice is a cry of faith. We have learnt much about faith from Luke’s gospel: its obedience, its humility, its boldness. Now we learn that faith is the same as the longing that turns to God in the darkness of oppression and cries out, persistently, for redress. We are not to lose heart. Tho there seems to be no end of suffering, no relief for the oppressed and exploited, we are to persist in crying out to God, who will hear our cry.

What did Jesus mean? Did he mean that his followers must go on, praying for justice, for two thousand years and possibly a lot longer, and not see justice done, but believe in it being done sometime? He certainly does mean that the cry for justice is the cry of faith when that cry is directed, with persistence, to God. And those who want to claim that faith stands aloof from the turmoil of this world and does not get involved in its issues of justice and human rights, are in the wrong. They are very seriously in the wrong if they think that faith can apply to the material positives, the building of wealth and success in business, or national safety, and not to the issues of justice for the poor and redress for the exploited.

It’s also a corrective for those who think that faith is all about enduring injustice patiently and uncomplainingly. There is indeed a faith that suffers meekly, or even cheerfully, and it is a glory to do so – but it is also faith to cry out in protest to God, looking to God for rescue from injustice. Jesus taught us to love our enemies and to turn the other cheek, but as we saw, that may also be an act of determined protest; and here he teaches us to cry out for redress, to persist in calling for the just intervention of God.

As with the other dimensions of the coming crisis, the question of justice, of prayer and of rescue for the oppressed will have its answer very soon in the events that loom in Jerusalem. And it will have its answer in the future, and in every generation the answer will be needed, sought and found and the challenge to faith renewed. As with every other dimension, it will not go on forever, and the day will come when all is fulfilled in the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God is already here and everything is now being fulfilled.

The history thru which we live is already the history of the fulfilment of Jesus' promise.

It is perhaps the most critical question in every age: Is there any hope of justice? Is there hope for the oppressed, and is there any hope that good will prevail against the vast power of evil? We see, if we do not suffer, terrible injustices, the oppression and exploitation of helpless individuals, the destruction of families, communities uprooted in the violence of invasion or erased from the map in grandiose schemes of urban and industrial planning. We see tribes, and whole peoples, wiped out or enslaved, or reduced to unending subservience by the stronger, the technologically superior, the ruthless who have power to shape the course of world development.

When we look thru history, our heart sinks to see how much injustice goes unchecked and how many of the exploited and persecuted go to their graves in pain and hopeless bewilderment. We see the millions of Africa transported to cruel slavery in the Americas. We see the native people of North and South America and Australia driven near to extinction, their survivors suppressed and humiliated, blamed for their inability to integrate and make their way in the society that destroyed them. We see millions of Chinese slaughtered by Imperial Japan, the holocaust of Jews under the Third Reich, and the callous suppression of freedom and hope under Communist dictatorship.

If the vast numbers and the horrible totality of the oppression appals us, yet, when we let our imagination focus in on individuals, the old woman, the young child, the broken man, the pain of it is even greater, because it is more human. Anger becomes weeping as we wonder: even when justice comes, for the tribe or the nation or the class, what about this one who has suffered and died without seeing any sign of hope? What about this one whose children have been taken, and even if justice is one day done for her people, she will never see them again?

But then again, we see the hope and the courage and the determination, and sometimes the struggle that wins thru to freedom. John Brown's body lies a-rotting in the grave, but his soul goes marching on. In the exile of slaves we see a new people arising, a culture neither African nor European, but itself, rescuing and lifting both from despair and banality, in music, song and story. We hear jazz and gospel and we see the struggle of a people who will not accept slavery either in the chains on their bodies or in the minds of their masters. A tired black woman on her way home from work refuses to give up her seat on the bus, and the Southern states of America

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are engulfed in an uprising of the just against oppression, hardness, inhumanity and the memory of generations of slavery.

We lived to see the end of the Third Reich and even some in Auschwitz lived to see it. We saw colonial subjects throwing off the domination of their masters, the raising of new flags and the hope of new nations. We saw the Berlin wall come tumbling down and the mighty power of the Soviet Union crumbling overnight. We saw the release of Nelson Mandela and the surrender of apartheid without war or collapse into anarchy. We saw the people of East Timor, written off by America, Britain and Australia, win their freedom and independence against the army of Indonesia.

And here again, though the great events and the rise of nations might rouse us to wonder and pride, it is the powerful story of individual people, real hearts and living spirits, that stirs up in us affection, hope and faith, a sense of the victory and triumph in a valiant human being. It is the story of one girl, Ann Frank, that moves us, or the fictional Kunta Kinte. As a "native" of Western Australia I am moved by the film "The Rabbit-Proof Fence" and by the story of Alice Nannup,⁵ and by what I know of my cousin, Gerard, who also was a stolen child, and whose story crosses hers. Even when justice is not finally done, we sometimes see, when we know the story, a grace and a triumph in those who have striven for it, and when there is victory, it is still the small story of individuals that is most deeply moving. I am stirred to admiration by what the people of East Timor achieved, but what particularly moves me is what I know of Reinato and the family who live behind the church in Lospalos.

And then again, when the people cry out to God, and persevere, and justice is finally done, when the prison camps are emptied and the walls tumble, when independence is achieved, and freedom, and dignity, there is sometimes a disappointment that makes us wonder: What has been achieved? Is this the kingdom of God for which we prayed? The Third Reich fell, but when it fell, where was Poland, for whom Britain went to war? The Soviet Union and its Communist dictatorship collapsed, but I have seen in the aftermath the pensioners of St Petersburg, the people who, of all Europe, first stood successfully against Hitler's armies, now selling their cutlery in the streets to survive. The Jewish people emerged from the horrors of the Final Solution with a new determination and confidence, gaining from the peoples of Europe an all-too-late respect and the beginnings of repentance; but there also emerged the nation of Israel, to inflict on Palestinians what Jews had suffered from Christian Europe, and to blight the memory of

⁵ When the Pelican Laughed: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992

martyrs with injustices done in their name. East Timor won its independence, but six years later gangs were burning and killing in Dili and a weak president, once the hero of the resistance, saw only an opportunity to extend his power.

We could weep with frustration, but Jesus tells us to pray and to cry out to God and not to give up, ever. Why do we pray? What will happen? Is it possible to believe that God will come like a knight in bright armour to prevent injustice and cruelty? Something is about to happen in Jerusalem, which will put an end to any such delusions. And yet we are to pray, and we are told that what we ask for in prayer we will receive. If we think that prayer is only about a future life and a kingdom somewhere else, we are wrong. Something is about to happen in Jerusalem which will put us right about that.

We are nearing the end, and the teaching of Jesus is coming together in a climax and completion that waits only to be confirmed by events. We, the disciples of Jesus are the managers of God's estate and we have responsibility for the people in it. But it is not a lonely responsibility, we have it as God's servants and we cry out to him to send other labourers for the work. With the poor and the oppressed, we cry out to God, even as we work to put right what is wrong, to bring the food of justice to mouths that cry for it. We turn to God, knowing that only God can do the job. Only God can enable us to do the job.

We are to pray without ever giving up, for we are indeed stewards and managers of the household of God. We are to ask, knowing it will be given to us, for the very Spirit of God that makes us leaders and rulers in the kingdom. We are to begin the work of the harvest and to ask the landowner to send in more workers, for the harvest is huge. And we are to take up a cross of torture and shame every day, to follow Jesus. For if the disciples themselves are not of the poor and the persecuted when they begin, they will become so as they remain faithful to their calling. The events about to unfold in Jerusalem will make all this clear to us.