

Pentecost XXV (33 C)
Isaiah 65.17-25/Psalm 116/II Thessalonians 3.1-18/Luke 21.1-19
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
18 November 2007

Getting to Paradise

~Paul H. Friesen~

'For I am about to create a new heavens and a new earth...no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress,' said the Lord in the days of the prophet Isaiah.

It has been easy to mock this beautiful vision, given all that has gone terribly wrong with the world since the time of Isaiah. But then again, when Isaiah wrote these words he had already lived through the terrible tragedies of his own nation, and could see no obvious way out of them.

Hundreds of years later Isaiah's courage to speak aloud God's promises encouraged the greatest of the Christian prophets, Jesus' disciple John, to speak out.

'Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth...and I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God...He will wipe every tear from their eye. Death will be no more.'¹

These words from the book of Revelation are every bit as hopeful as Isaiah's. But they were written as John was in exile on the Isle of Patmos and the Roman Empire was beginning to persecute the Christian Church. And John couldn't see any obvious way out—he saw beasts and dragons all around him. And he saw battles and blood, and martyrs—just like Anglicans and all other Christians saw in Rwanda only a few years ago, like the Christians of Iraq and Palestine see today.

And yet Isaiah and John had hope, a hope so firm and clear that they could use careful, beautiful words to describe what they saw God was going to do. These are the words that our God wants us to make our own this morning and carry with us out the doors later this morning.

But how do we get there—I mean how do we make this vision our own? We do confess every week that it is God through Jesus Christ that will re-create our world. We say that we believe in the 'the life everlasting' and 'the life of the world to come'. In the Gospel of Luke Jesus said: 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God.'²

¹ *Revelation* 21.1-4. All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version* unless noted.

²*Luke* 4.43.

In fact Jesus gives the 'good news of the kingdom' in his first sermon in the Gospel of Luke in the synagogue in Nazereth where he grew up:

'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
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

And Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'³

As Christians we need to practice fixing our eyes on Jesus, through whom we not only experience forgiveness of sins, but the promise of entering Christ's kingdom. Yet as Christians, just like Jesus' disciples, we are also asked to assist in delivering 'the good news of the kingdom'.

But how do we get to the 'kingdom'—I mean how do we make Isaiah's vision and Jesus' mission our own mission? If you're like me you are easily overwhelmed by the idea of changing things, of seeing God's kingdom opening its doors.

At the point of death, at funerals, we look in Christian hope into God's kingdom, and commend those departed from us into the presence of Christ the King. But are we only meant to wait for this? Or—are our lives meant to be at the forefront, the cutting edge, of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus, in The Gospel of Luke, gave many examples of how to live at the forefront of the Kingdom of God. He showed us, above all, that self-sacrifice was the key to the Kingdom. Jesus showed us with his life of ministry and suffering and death for the world. It is by this means that the Kingdom was opened to us. Nothing else—no one else—could have opened it.

But it is by our self-sacrifice that we walk through the gates into the Kingdom, and enjoy it and bring others with us. So that we are not overwhelmed Jesus shows the model of self-sacrifice in today's Gospel.

[Jesus] looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, 'Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.'

³Luke 4.18-21.

Did Jesus despise the gifts of the rich? Not at all! But Jesus indicated that the way into the Kingdom of God is not by all of us conforming to some abstract standard of human greatness, but by 'putting in all that we have to live on.' This is a matter of money—but it is connected to how we use all the gifts we have.

Jesus didn't rush over to the widow and say, 'Stop—you need that more than whoever is going to receive this!' The way into the kingdom is through offering what we have, not what we don't have. And this self-sacrifice is what God honours.

You might be surprised that the example I am about to use would come to mind after thinking about Jesus' poor widow. I have just seen now, for a second time, the film *Amazing Grace*, as the DVD of the movie from this spring was released this week.

It is one of the few films I have seen in the theatre this year, and I think it's the first time I have seen such a newly released DVD. If you haven't seen it, it is worth seeing, and seeing it with any children interested enough to sit with you and watch it and discuss it. It won't likely win an academy award, but it is good art that opens up the human things that are really worth talking about.

This year, 2007, is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the trading of slaves in the British Empire, so the film tells the tremendously encouraging story of the role William Wilberforce played in the abolition. He wasn't a poor widow; he was an heir to a fortune.

But like the widow put all she had into the treasury of the temple, so Wilberforce put in everything he had into the cause of giving back the humanity of African slaves. They were, in the 1700s, transported against their will from their homes into forced labour in the West Indies and in America and in England itself.

Wilberforce may have inherited a fortune. He may have been an attractive and popular man, a Member of Parliament and a great speech-maker. But he risked it all in the cause of the ending of the slave trade. He gave up much of his money in the cause. He gave up the rights to the pleasures of men of his class.

Wilberforce underwent an Evangelical conversion experience to Christ in the days when Evangelicals were seen as cranks, cutting edge zealots. They were devoted to Bible reading, worship, and dangerous social reforms. So Wilberforce gave up his health and his youth for an uncertain political cause.

But his life, like the life of the poor widow, didn't immediately return marvellous results for self-sacrifice. Wilberforce was born in 1759. In the 1780s, when he was in his mid-twenties, he entered parliament. He enjoyed a close friendship with William Pitt, soon to become Prime Minister and a powerful politician for years. Wilberforce could sway Parliament with his speeches.

And yet it took years, for one simple act to be passed. After years of work a Parliamentary act was passed abolishing the seizing and selling and transporting of

human beings across the oceans. It took this in spite of much public support. It took all his arts to defeat the idea that ‘the economy would suffer’ if slave trading was abolished.

Wilberforce had to cope with the fact that America continued on with slavery and slave trading long after his death. In fact only on his deathbed in 1833 did he hear the news that slavery itself (it had remained legal after slave-trading was stopped) was now finally abolished too. And he knew that prejudice remained, as did so many obvious social tragedies in England itself—in the factories and on the streets.

But Wilberforce, like Jesus’ poor widow, like Isaiah, knew that the ‘new creation’ did not rest on him. He knew that he had seen the Kingdom of God revealed before his eyes and had brought others with him into it. And he knew that the Kingdom of God would advance in God’s mercy long after he had finished his earthly pilgrimage.

Where does that leave us this morning?

Well, this week we will meet those who need to be relieved from crying, those who need to see their children grow old, who need to see the gardens they planted and the homes they built filled with the families they have raised—those who need to see the lion and the lamb and the ox feed together.

Our role is not to carry God’s kingdom, the new heaven and the new earth, on our shoulders. But in God’s mercy we will see it, and in Christ’s power we will live like the poor widow—we will feel her presence beside us as we come and go.

‘She has put in all that she had to live on.’ May we do the same.

Amen.