

The 'now' and the 'not yet'

A Sermon preached on 6th Nov 2022 at Truro Cathedral

Job 19: 23 – 27a

2 Thess 2: 1 – 5, 13 – end

Luke 20: 27 – 38

We sometimes say that there is a distinct quality of 'now and not yet' embedded in our Christian faith. Which is a short-hand – and hopefully more comprehensible - way of referring to a theological idea called 'eschatology'. It is something we encounter quite a bit in our readings at this time of year as we think about past, present and future in God's economy of things – in God's kingdom. Eschatology – and that's the last time I'll use that word in this sermon – is about the study of the 'end times'. That means it is about how we think about what is the ultimate destiny of ourselves and of all creation – it is an area of theology where we consider questions like where are we going? What is it all for? What is the purpose of our lives and of all life in a world which we believe to be created and sustained by an all-loving God?

As we think about the fulfilment of God's ultimate will and purposes for the world, we are invited to ponder the significance of the coming of Christ into the world, and the question of whether we understand God's kingdom as with us in the here and now, fully present to us through the work of the holy Spirit in the world, or whether we think God's kingdom will only become a reality within God's creation at some time in the far distant future, unspecified and unknowable to us who live within the confines of space and time. Most of us tend to come down somewhere in the middle of these two extremes – which on the one hand you might say is a masterly compromise – or indeed perhaps even a fudge – and on the other hand you might say is actually a good way of understanding where we find ourselves as Christian people living two thousand years after the birth of Christ, yet still inhabiting a world of violence, conflict and terror, such as surely bears little relation to the promised kingdom of God of the bible.

And this is what we mean when we sometimes talk about the 'now and not yet' of our Christian faith – or the 'now and not yet' of the kingdom of God. Is the kingdom of God something that went past us for ever in the events of history 2000 years ago, is it something that we experience in today's world through the lived experience of our Christian faith, or is the kingdom of God something that will only happen at some unspecified time in the future and has definitely not yet come to pass? These are the questions that that big E-word seeks to explore – and for what it's worth, mainstream Christian theology generally answers those questions respectively as 'no, yes and yes' – meaning that we consider that the coming of Christ into the world 2000 years ago was not an event that happened only in history and had no further significance in the world after the death of Jesus. Rather it was an event that has significance now – it has meaning in and for our present existence in the world, and it is also something of cosmic significance for the whole of creation as we look in faith to the promised fulfilment of the kingdom of God.

In Christian theology, the kingdom of God is understood as both now and not yet, and it is inevitable that there are shades of opinion around this matter, as around much else in Christian theology and something of this ambivalence is reflected in our NT readings this morning.

The question asked of Jesus by the Sadducees directs our thoughts inevitably towards questions of the future. And Jesus answers them by dealing straightforwardly with the thought behind their questions – that the future will be as different from today as you can possibly imagine – and probably more so. He goes on to say further that in God, in effect, past, present and future are all united, the 'now' and the 'not yet' are all one and that life under God's rule in the here and now is a good indication, though only an indication, of what may await us in the future. It is quite an opaque passage and there is a lot going on here that depends on theological arguments rife in the first century rather than things that might bother us today. But nonetheless, Jesus' blending of past, present and future in his response to the Sadducees is something we can continue to ponder through this present season as we look both backwards and forwards with the eyes of our faith.

And in our reading from Paul's 2nd letter to the Thessalonians, we hear Paul addressing this issue of how we think about the future in the context of the present or perhaps more accurately, how we behave in the present in the context of how we understand the future. As Paul urges the Thessalonians to stand firm in their trust in the promise of God, as revealed in the coming of Christ, he bids them look to God's good future, to be made manifest in the future in God's good time. And he then goes on to get down to the practicalities of this world, as it were, as he gives thanks for the church at Thessalonica and for their work and witness and encourages them to keep on doing as they are doing, proclaiming their Christian faith by word and deed and doing all the practical things that need doing day by day to make the kingdom of God a reality in the here and now. They are to follow the path of the kingdom in the everyday world they inhabit, whilst resting in the security of God's promised future kingdom – very much a 'now and not yet' approach to their discipleship.

So what does all that have to say to us living as we do very much in the 'now' of our day to day lives, but perhaps struggling to give those lives the wider context, purpose and meaning that humanity is created to seek? Our faith in the 'not yet' of God's promises can be a very real and present underpinning to our ability to live the call of God in the 'now', given, in our day, the challenges to the ways of God that infest the world around us in so many ways.

In particular, I am thinking this week of the call of God upon all of our lives to address and mitigate the threat of climate change and its effects to the whole web of life on earth. The massiveness of this menace in the 'now' of today's world is without doubt enough to induce a level of numbness in us that rapidly becomes inertia and hopelessness. But our Christian faith in the 'not yet' of God's kingdom, in the goodness of God that ultimately has the last word for all creation, does not allow us to remain in that place of despair. Rather, the 'now' and the 'not yet' of God's

promises call us to work with commitment in the present for the future good of all life, otherwise known as the kingdom of God.

And you will be glad to know that we have three particular opportunities to live into this call today. As I said in my introductory note to this week's order of service, the COP27 climate change talks get underway this weekend in Egypt. Our prayers are asked for that meeting, for all who attend and for real progress to be made towards the implementation of the commitments made in past years. Please do pray for actions rather than words now – the time for talking is running out.

In practical terms – so important to Paul and his churches - we know that many parts of the world are already suffering from profound and serious effects of climate change. Christian Aid have been campaigning on this issue for many years now and are running a renewed Climate Justice Campaign during the COP27 meeting. There is a meeting next Saturday morning at ASH church with a panel of invited speakers and the opportunity to find out more about how we can make our commitment to the work of God's kingdom today, a reality for so many of those who are unjustly affected by the world's changing climate. Do please come to that if you can – you can pick up details as you leave the cathedral this morning.

And finally, Christian Aid are appealing at this time for help for some of those who are most vulnerable to climate change in the world at this time – specifically the millions of people in East Africa who are suffering from the worst drought in 40 years, which is threatening to bring famine to that part of the world on a scale not seen for decades. Please do give what you can to that appeal, either at the retiring collection today or through the CA website.

Theological ideas about relationships between past present and future can sometimes seem a bit abstract – strictly for theologians and for 'those who like that sort of thing.' But the close relationship between past, present and future that Jesus revealed in his exchange with the Sadducees and which Paul wrote about in many of his letters, is fundamental to our understanding of our personal place in the economy of God's kingdom – and is therefore fundamental to our ability to work and witness in the name of Christ day by day. It is from our perspective on the things of the 'not yet' that we are able to live with joy and persistence the call of God on our lives in the 'now'. It is what empowers us to be strengthened in every good work and deed – and in the final analysis, it is what gives us the meaning and purpose that fulfils our created humanity.

Amen