Trinity 10C St Bartholomew 24/08/25

The kingdom of heaven, the one of which Jesus speaks, is not at all like the kingdom in which we live. The truths which guide often run counter to all we assume to be true about many aspects of our life: the order of things, the ways of reward and punishment, the best ways to care for ourselves, and the best ways to assure our safety. In all of these matters, if we believe what we read in scripture, heaven is not like earth.

The people of Israel heard God's voice in a variety of ways. There was the fire of the burning bush, the voice in a storm, and a voice so thunderous on Sinai that they asked God to talk to them through Moses. Jesus' voice is different, as the author of Hebrews points out. It is a human voice, complete with a human face and body, it is a voice that knows intimately the ways of men, women, and children.

The warning in the gospel is ominously clear. In this reading from Luke, Jesus tells us four very important things about the kingdom:

The door is narrow.
There will come a time when the door will shut, so time is not unlimited.
There will be no favouritism.
The truths, which govern us now, do not govern the kingdom.

This last point had to be particularly painful for Jesus' audience. He told them that Abraham, Jacob, and all the prophets, the most revered men of their history, would sit down and eat with strangers, gentiles even. That notion was horrifying enough but he went on to say that they, good Jews, might be thrown out. He upset the social and intellectual order on which they depended.

Where is the Jesus who was telling us, "Do not be afraid little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom?" (Luke 12:32) Who is this one who now says, "for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able?"

This new teaching is not so much about the nature of the kingdom as it is about **us**. We are creatures of free choice. It may be the Father's good pleasure to offer us the kingdom, but whether we enter or not is our choice. We are responsible for ourselves.

This does not mean we must search for the invitation to enter that narrow door. Every moment of every day, the door stands open. With every breath we take, Jesus invites us to enter. But, as surely as it is the father's good pleasure to offer us the kingdom, it is equally certain that it is his grief to watch us brush it aside or even reject it.

Is it not possible that the kingdom of which we speak is not a far away destination but a present possibility? Can it be, not a place, but a decision, a state of being which rests in our relationship with Jesus Christ in our present circumstance?

The stories in the Bible continue to address our lives thousands of years after they were first written down because they speak to our experience. Whether we accept them as literal, historical fact or metaphor and myth, the stories ring true to us. We have had the experiences of which they speak.

We all want a Moses to lead us out of our distresses but, when we get one, we complain that he isn't leading us fast enough or in the way we want to go.

We want a leader, a king, to tell us what to do but we complain when Saul turned out to be human like the rest of us.

We all want prophets to tell us the will of God. And we all make excuses to explain why we can't possibly heed and follow God's law. Making excuses is just part of what it means to be human and we are as human in our spiritual life as we are in any other aspect of living.

What excuses do the corporate world of finance hear most often from their employees. Here are the top ten answers I read recently:

10. No one showed me how;
9. I was going to do it later;
8. My supervisor doesn't understand;
7. I had too many interruptions;
6. I didn't know it was my job;
5. We've never done it that way before;
4. I didn't have time;
3. Something came up;
2. It was _____'s fault; and
1. It's not my fault.

Notice how none of the employees ever said, "It didn't need to be done." They all conceded that the unaccomplished task was a necessary one that needed to be done. They just didn't do it, but they had several excellent excuses. If this is the way people behave in their professional lives, where their livelihood is on the line, can we really expect them to act differently in their spiritual/Church life?

I once asked a group of clergy colleagues of mine to list the excuses they hear most often when people decline to do things at or for the church. The answers will not surprise anyone who has been in a church for more than a couple of years. You may even be intimately familiar with a couple of them. The top ten, in no particular order, were: I'm too busy; I'm too old; I've never done it before; I've done it too much it's someone else's turn; I can't work with him (or her); I'll do it some other time (when my kids are older, when I retire, and so on); and, my all-time favourite — I'll do what I want to do, not what you ask me…..

And that's generally some people at church — non-Christians, unchurched people don't make excuses. They just don't care. Thank God it's the people of God who realise that God's will is important. It's the people of God who have to scramble to find excuses for not doing it. And it runs deeper than just doing church work.

Scripture tells us that what God really requires of us runs deeper. What God asks of us reaches beyond our personal calendar into the very depth of our soul and the source of our spirit and has to do with our relationship with the ever-present Lord as God comes to us in Jesus Christ.

It has to do with how that relationship is lived out in our relationships with other people. It has to do with gentleness, kindness, and humility, as well as our love and support for each other. Do you think that this may not be the case? Ask the biblical writers and over and over their answers were nearly identical:

Micah: “He has told you, O man, what is good; And what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God? (6:8)

Isaiah: “Remove the evil of your deeds from my sight. Cease to do evil. Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17).

Jeremiah: “Amend your ways and your deeds…practice justice between a man and his neighbour; do not oppress the alien in your land, nor the orphan, nor the widow, and do not shed innocent blood nor walk after other gods” (Jeremiah 7:3 ff).

John the Baptist: “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise” (Luke 3:11).

Paul: “…lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit and the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4)

And Jesus: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15).

God asks us to change, to turn our lives over to God’s will. And yet, we make excuses for our inability to do so: It’s the way I was raised. It’s the community I live in. I can’t help the way I feel. I’m just that kind of person. I’m afraid. But, if we listen, God is here to answer us even as God answered the young Jeremiah, who was only a teenager when God called him to be a prophet.

Recall, if you will, the first chapter of the book of Jeremiah wherein young Jeremiah was called by God through a dream. “I created you for one purpose,” said the Lord,“to be a prophet to the nations.” Jeremiah, no doubt still rubbing the sleep from his eyes, was ready with an excuse why he couldn’t possibly do as the Lord asked: “Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am just a child.” But God stopped him in his tracks. Don’t say I’m just a child. Don’t say I’m too young. Don’t make any excuses. God does not want excuses.

If this is true, life in the kingdom lies in our choices, especially those choices found in the baptismal service (APBA 1995):

Do you turn to Christ?
Do you repent of your sins?
Do you reject selfish living, and all that is false and unjust?
Do you renounce Satan and all evil?

These are not just familiar words. They are sworn sacred words, sworn sacred intentions, and sworn sacred choices about our being. Sworn by us, or on our behalf. In the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is the door. Our choices are the keys. Fr Robert