

Striving for the Unattainable

A sermon on Mark 1:1-8; 2 Peter 3:8-15a; Isaiah 40:1-11 & Psalm 85

by Nathan Nettleton, 10 December 2023

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Message

Though we are to strive for righteousness and justice now, what we achieve now is a mere shadow of what will be fulfilled in the day of the Lord.

Sermon

A deep yearning hope in the coming Christ is always a part of our faith and discipleship, but in this season of Advent, we give it even more attention than usual. A genuinely Christian hope in the coming Christ and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth is not the same as the version held by some of the spectacular and bizarre apocalyptic cults which make the news from time to time, and which sometimes scare us off from wanting to think or talk about this hope. One of the things that sets the two apart is the understanding of how our life now relates to our life in the coming kingdom or culture of God.

Often in the weirdo apocalyptic cults, hope in the coming kingdom results in one of two attitudes to this world. In one version, the normal everyday world is rejected and shunned as evil, resulting in extreme withdrawal and asceticism. A couple of decades back, there was even one that made the news for adopting an "air diet" – a complete rejection of food and drink. Funnily enough, they didn't last long, and they didn't claim to be Christian in any way, but they are nevertheless about as extreme an example of rejecting the world as one could imagine. More often though this rejection is seen just in refusal to be involved in the sorts of lives and pleasures that most people take for granted.

The other version of this apocalyptic fanaticism teaches that what takes place in this life doesn't matter. There is licence to do anything, because only the future world matters and this world and what we do in it are irrelevant and meaningless. Sometimes this ends up in debauched hedonism and sex scandals, and sometimes it results in the worst excesses of environmental vandalism because the planet doesn't matter either.

The thing that both versions have in common is that they see this life as unconnected to the next life, perhaps even as a polar opposite of the next life. All their attention is on what comes next. Sometimes this is acted out in a literal manner with people abandoning everything and gazing expectantly at the sky at whatever time their guru has decreed that the Christ will return.

The Bible readings we heard tonight all offer an alternative to these errors. They all speak of preparing the way for the Lord and they are all clear that we don't prepare by sitting on our hands gazing at the sky and waiting for an escape from this world.

Peter is the most explicit in the reading we heard from his second letter. "While you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace." He even says that we are not just waiting for the coming of the day of God, but we are hastening it's coming by living lives of holiness and godliness.

The words of John the Baptist, picked up from the Isaiah reading suggest the same. We are called to prepare the way of the Lord. We don't just wait for the Lord to arrive, we prepare the way. And so John calls people to repent in preparation, to change their way of living, and to symbolise their repentance in baptism.

Leaving aside the crazy apocalyptic cults, there is another view of the coming reign of God at the other end of the spectrum of Christian thinking, a view which I suspect is also in error. It is a view which sees it as our job to bring about the kingdom of God, the culture of God. The kingdom of God is defined in terms of its characteristics, many of which are listed in these passages – justice, peace, righteousness, faithfulness, the richness of the earth – and then the kingdom of God is understood to be present to the extent that we manage to bring these things to reality in the world now. So if we can all work together to bring peace to Gaza and Ukraine, and justice to Burma and Palestine, and food security to Yemen and the Central African Republic, and liberation to the women and girls of Afghanistan, then we will be creating the kingdom of God on earth.

Now if this is an error, as I suspect it is, it is not nearly as dangerous an error as the opposite extreme, for at least this one has us in action rather than sitting on our hands waiting. The action will be pretty similar to those actions we hear Peter and Isaiah and John the Baptist calling us to. The trouble is that we may find ourselves prone to becoming discouraged and burned out as we strive to bring God's kingdom to fulfilment, and find that we are powerless to achieve it.

Apart from the idea that by our righteous action we may hasten the day of the Lord, the scriptures never suggest that bringing the kingdom of God to fulfilment can be attributed to anyone other than God. The fulfilment of God's kingdom will come by God's hand, at a time of God's choosing. We are not called to make it happen but to prepare the way for it. I hear this as good news, not only because it rescues us from the futility of trying to do what is way beyond us, but also because it gives real meaning and purpose to what we do now, to how we live and act in this world day by day. All those peace and justice goals I just listed are still on our to-do list, but we are freed from the responsibility for fulfilling them. We are just preparing the way of the Lord. We are called to be faithful, not necessarily effective.

Perhaps there is a key in the last words we heard from John the Baptist in this reading: "I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit." John is quite clear that there is something coming soon which is far more important than anything he can do, and yet he doesn't think that that renders his work futile. He is laying a foundation on which another will build. He is enacting the beginning of something which will later be brought to fulfilment.

John is certainly not saying that baptism in water for repentance is meaningless. But he is saying that it won't mean much if it is not lived out, and that only becomes possible when we are immersed not just in water, but in the Holy Spirit. John knows only too well that he can't make that happen. He might be able to preach with a passion and fire that draws people out into the wilderness to hear him and respond, but only Jesus Christ can baptise our response with the Holy Spirit.

This is perhaps illustrated in what little we know of those who responded to John's message. Although we are told that all the people of Jerusalem went out to hear him and be baptised

by him, the same people of Jerusalem just a few years later could become a frenzied mob screaming for Jesus to be crucified.

I baptise you with water, but you'll need more than that if you are to be the way of the Lord, said John.

We, though, are in a different place again. We have responded not just to the preaching of John, but to the preaching of Jesus. We have been baptised not just with water, but with the Holy Spirit. And yet the kingdom of God has still not been fulfilled. Still we wait and hope and struggle and endure. How then does our righteous living have meaning if we are still waiting?

Well, in many ways it is the same – we are preparing the way, we are acting out as best we can that which will be eventually fulfilled. The life and death and new life of Jesus Christ, and the baptism with the Holy Spirit at Christ's hand have taken us a massive step closer to seeing the kingdom of God fulfilled, but the final fulfilment is still a growing light beckoning to us from the horizon. And as Peter says in his letter, we should regard the delay with thanksgiving because it shows us that God is not wanting anyone to be left out. The patience of God is our salvation.

But there is something more now, because of what Jesus has done and is doing. We now live with a foot in each world. The culture of God has come near to us in Jesus and we have been caught up in its life. Now, every time the life of Christ is expressed in this world, heaven and earth touch one another. Now we experience sacramentally the first fruits of the life that is to come. We are not just waiting, and we are not just working to prepare for something future, but we are beginning to live the life of the Kingdom here and now. We are growing into the life that is still to come.

When we love one another the life of the kingdom is glimpsed. When we share bread and wine and see in that sharing our oneness with all the earth, we taste the life to come. When we overcome some instance of oppression and bring about a new expression of justice, we prepare a way on which Christ comes into our world. We have not created the kingdom, but we have enabled its life to be glimpsed and known.

For now, these things are still achieved with struggle and effort and hard work. We do not find it easy to push beyond mere niceness to actually love one another across our divides. We find it hard to release our grip on our little tastes of God's life and to share them freely with all the earth. We find it only too easy to turn away our eyes from oppression and avoid the costly road of striving for justice. But we have tasted the first fruits of new life and we hunger for more.

The psalmist gives us such an awesome vision of what is coming to us in Christ. "Love and faithfulness embrace, peace and justice kiss. Fidelity sprouts from the earth, justice leans down from heaven." When you've fought for justice, haven't you longed for the day when peace and justice kiss. When love has seemed to tear you in opposite directions, haven't you longed for the day when love and faithfulness truly embrace.

That day is coming. Prepare the way of the Lord. As best you can, with hope and struggle and endurance, strive to live in the ways of love and faithfulness and peace and justice now,

but know that the day is coming when they will embrace. On that day the struggle will be over. All will be made new. The whole earth, long ago baptised with water, will be baptised with Holy Spirit, and the bread and wine that we share together will be known and shared by all as the bread of heaven and the wine of overflowing life.