

Culture Clash

A sermon on Mark 1:14-20 & 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 by Nathan Nettleton, 21 January 2018
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Message

The culture of God is emerging in our present world, confronting us with a choice - do we cling to our allegiance to the cultures that have raised us or let go of them and embrace the culture of God.

Sermon

Australia Day, which much of the country will observe in one way or another later this week, raises all sorts of troubling questions, some of them quite divisive. The most obvious and widely discussed are the questions of how basing the national day on the anniversary of the British occupation can be respectful and inclusive of the indigenous nations who had already lived here for millennia, and of the significant percentage of the present population who have arrived since then from various other parts of the world. The very choice of date seems to overtly privilege one set of stories over all others. And of course, because cultures are built from the dominant stories, this choice seems to prioritise the advancement of one culture over all others.

I want to run with a question about culture tonight, but it is a bit of a spin off from the usual culture questions that are raised by Australia Day. I want to ask whether the basic message that Jesus preached in fact raises some even more fundamental challenges to the ways culture is celebrated in this country.

In tonight's gospel reading, we heard Mark's brief summary of the main thrust of Jesus's early preaching:

“The time has come, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

So, to the disappointment of many modern Christians, the guts of Jesus's message was not a sacrificial death on the cross, nor the experience of being born again, nor the need to be saved from an eternity in hell, nor the doctrine of the Trinity, but the emergence in the here and now, in the midst of this world, of the kingdom of God. “Great news! The time has come, and the kingdom of God is within reach, so turn your life around and get on board.”

Now the first and biggest question that that raises for us is “what does it mean?”

In Jesus's day, the people were entirely familiar with announcements like this one. It was not at all unusual for people to hear announcements that went something like “Good News! The kingdom of Rome has arrived and is now in charge here. You will now have peace and prosperity, guaranteed by Rome.”

Now of course, whether you hear that as genuine good news, or as toxic propaganda depends a lot on your perspective on the way things were before and on the relative merits of the new pretender. After all, the announcement in Sydney in 1788 was not all that different. “Good news! The United Kingdom has arrived and taken charge of this land. That's got to be good doesn't it?!” Well it turned out to be anything but good for most of the existing population.

So is what Jesus is saying just a variation on this? Is he just saying “You’ve got a new boss. God is now in charge.” Well, to some extent that is what he is saying, and the fact that he used such familiar political language can hardly be an accident. You can see why the kingdom of Rome saw Jesus and his followers as a threat. If they are telling everybody that Rome is now in charge, and someone bobs up saying, “Actually, we’ve got a different view on who’s in charge,” it’s probably not going to end in a nice cooperative power-sharing arrangement. More likely blood and tears. But when Jesus uses the language of kingdoms in that age, the political implications were clearly intentional.

But what are we to make of it now? Kingdoms are not really part of our political thinking. A lot of preachers, including me, have felt that we need to find a new word to translate the idea of the kingdom, because it is a rather out of date term that no longer easily communicates what it once did. Some people have gone for words like reign of God or realm of God, but while they might get away from the masculine imagery of kings, they are not words that add any helpful sense of meaning for us. So what might help? What is this kingdom and how might we best describe it?

It is my view that the most helpful way for us to think about the meaning of the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven now is to think of it as the culture of God, or the culture of heaven. “Great news! The time has come, and the culture of God is emerging, so turn your life around and get on board.”

That might, at first glance, seem less political and less about who is in charge, but stop and think about the ways we talk about culture now. We often use the phrase “cultural imperialism” which brings together the ideas of culture and empire or kingdom. And we talk about dominant cultures, and about cultural assimilation, and about cultural clashes, and even culture wars. These ideas are very much about the power that cultures wield, and the powerful influence they have over people’s lives.

And more importantly, culture is very much about the way people behave and relate to each other, and who they identify with and what they regard as important. In many places, and especially here in Australia, people tend to feel a much stronger sense of allegiance to their culture than they do to the political structures or symbols of the state.

You could stand up at an Australia Day celebration and loudly declare that our flag is a hideous rag that should be replaced, and you’d probably get away with it. You wouldn’t dare do that in the USA. And you could stand up and say that the Prime Minister is a bozo, and that the constitution is a joke, and most of the crowd would applaud you.

But if you stood up and yelled out that Australian culture sucks, you could find yourself in a whole lot of trouble. You see, culture is us. Culture is who we are and how we do things, and what we value and stand for. If you criticise the home culture, you are attacking home sweet home, and you can expect a fierce resistance.

Now when we hear Jesus saying, “The culture of God is at hand, get on board”, most people don’t immediately hear that as the kind of threat that the Roman empire thought it was. Why? Because most of us feel so comfortable and positive about our culture, that we imagine that the culture of heaven is a lot like our culture, only more so. We think the culture of God

is built on the values that we hold dear, but that the disruptive problem people will have been removed. It will be our culture, but completely harmonious.

We Australians are probably especially prone to this thinking because we are so proud of our multiculturalism, so we think we have already assimilated the best of all the world's cultures and fulfilled the biblical image of gathering all nations into one family. The existence of horrific immigration detention centres gives the lie to our delusion, but we keep them hidden from sight and enjoy our delusion.

You can see this tendency to think of our culture as reflecting the culture of God at its most obvious in the way the churches have become wedded to the traditional family values cause. The whole point of the traditional family values campaign is the assumption that the way we have traditionally done things is self-evidently right and therefore completely congruent with the kingdom of God. But you don't have to look too much further than tonight's readings to see the nonsense of this.

The traditional family values of Jesus's day said that young men went into the family business and supported their parents, but tonight we heard Jesus calling a bunch of young men to abandon their family businesses and leave their parents to follow Jesus. And in the reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we hear the Apostle suggesting that the changes we are going through are so major that we might give up on all sorts of cherished cultural practices, including marriage and conventional patterns of private property. Why? Because "the present form of this world is passing away." He is effectively saying that traditional values and traditional cultural practices and institutions, even including marriage, are of questionable value in light of the massive cultural change that is the emerging kingdom of God.

Now I have already used up too much of my time, and I'm not going to be able to go into much detail about how the culture of God might look significantly different to Australian culture or any other culture, and why it might indeed lead to something of a culture clash with the cultures we have been reared in. But it would be a bit gutless if I sidestepped that completely, so let me just focus on one obvious area of difference, and it is perhaps the area that most immediately provokes angst and hostility.

The culture of God is so radically inclusive that it does not and will not recognise the legitimacy of any favouring of the interests of one group over those of another group. Jesus nearly got himself lynched after his first recorded sermon in the Capernaum synagogue because the guts of his message was that God was not on the side of Israel and against Israel's enemies, because God does not take sides with anyone. Millions of Americans put bumper stickers on their cars saying "God bless America." But if you put a bumper sticker on your car that says "God bless every nation, no exceptions", it is hugely controversial and attracts a lot of hostility.

Australians are less openly religious, but can be just as fiercely nationalistic. It is not uncommon to see bumper stickers that say things like "Support Australian jobs, buy Australian," or "Australia, if you don't love it, leave."

Perhaps we can see what is wrong with those slogans if we try to reframe them according to different values. What about, “Support jobs in poor countries, buy cheap imports”? Or “Australia, if you don’t love it, help us make it better”?

Now I am well aware that there are good environmental reasons for buying locally produced goods to avoid the massive fuel burning of transporting goods around the globe, but that’s not what the bumper sticker was arguing, was it? It was appealing to our instinct to favour the interests of “us” over the interests of “them”. Why are Australian jobs more important than jobs in other parts of the world? The kingdom of God breaks down all such divisions of us and them. The only time Jesus ever expresses a preference for serving the interests of his own people over outsiders, he is gently corrected and he repents on the spot (Matthew 15:21-28).

So here’s the thing to try to do this week if you are listening to the rhetoric of national self-congratulation. Try to decode the rhetoric and critique it in light of the values of the emerging culture of God. Much of the rhetoric will work with an implicit “us” and “them” understanding. I say implicit, because it usually won’t mention “them” at all, but whenever it is saying “we Australians are this or that” or “Australian culture promotes this or that”, the implication is that this is true, as opposed to “them”, those people in other cultures who are not like “us”.

So ask yourself whether it is true. When the rhetoric declares that “Australians are uniquely generous and ready to pitch in and help in the face of great adversities like bushfires and floods”, ask yourself whether it is really true that the rest of the world is really less generous when facing adversity or tragedy. And then ask whether Australians push their government to prove this generosity in our overseas aid budget and our refugee intake. The only “us” and “them” identification that reflects the culture of God is “us given and giving for the sake of them.”

And then the big question to ask ourselves is which culture we really identify ourselves with. Which culture do we celebrate and invite to shape our hearts, our minds, our values, our lifestyles, and our relationships with those around us and far away from us. Is it primarily the culture of Australia, or of a sub-group within Australia, or the culture of a country we were raised in, or is it now the emerging culture of God.

The flag waving festivities this week can perhaps help us to see more clearly the nature of the question, a question that will remain just as important after we have changed the date of our national day to something more appropriate. Where does our identity lie, and where do we want it to lie? Have we really begun to respond to the call of Jesus: “Great news! The time has come, and the culture of God is emerging, so turn your life around, leave your old allegiances behind, and get on board.”

If you are wanting to respond to that call, then take note that what we are about to do here must trump any of the flag waving and back slapping that goes on this week. What we are about to do at this table is the central celebration of the emerging culture of God. It is a celebration whose central symbol is not one of triumphalism and superiority, but of brokenness, of Jesus given for us, and us given for the life of all the world. The culture of God has come near. It is time to let it trump all our other allegiances, turn our lives around, and get on board. For the sake of all the world.