

Today!

This Sunday and next are all about getting along in the strange new world created by the kingdom of God.

So it's no small irony that two of the morning paper opinion pieces had these headlines:

The first:

"The Exhausted Majority Says: Candidates Keep It Clean!"

A piece about local organizations asking politicians to sign an oath to avoid divisive and hateful speech.

And the second: "Hostility on the rise, America is falling apart at the seams!"

You don't need me to summarize what that was about!

And while it's tempting to just throw up our hands and wait for civilization to come crashing down, maybe what this time in human history calls for is that we Christians figure out who we are.

And who we are called to become.

And then get to it!

It starts with Paul's letter today.

Just look at what an encounter with Christ did to that guy!

He was an "Israel First", "Jew First", "Men First", "Pharisee First" kind of guy, who gets knocked on his backside by our Lord.

And after that encounter, he suddenly grasps the truth of our situation.

Which is that God is deeply and totally and unconditionally in love with each and every human being.

From every last culture, color, gender, nationality, language and creed.

The fantastic insight that Paul gets is that in God, all human beings are connected to one another.

That we are as interconnected to each other as our nose is to our face.

Our fingers to our hands.

Our toes to our feet.

And to pretend otherwise is the primary source of all of our loneliness.

Paul comes to see that in Jesus, we can rediscover our connectedness.

Our inseparability.

What Paul comes to see in Jesus is that the grand promises of the Older Testament have finally come true.

“In Jesus, the free gift of being ‘born again’ means participating in a new Genesis.

Being part of a new creation.

Where the downward spiral of death and violence is not simply rejected.

It’s defeated.

As we are all of us invited to be part of a movement heading up.

A movement rooted in forgiveness and generosity.

A movement that culminates in resurrection!

The defeat of our harshest and most intractable enemy.

The defeat of death.

To follow Jesus means taking part in a new Exodus.

Passing through the waters, not of the Red Sea, but of Baptism.

It means eating a new Passover meal.

Not a lamb roasted over a fire, but our Lord’s body and blood.

It means liberation from the powers that oppress and enslave.

It means becoming useful citizens of the kingdom of God.

That peaceable kingdom the prophets dreamed of, now accomplished in Christ.

As we learn about the kingdom life.

Then, through example, guiding others into that same life.

Which is why, in his hometown, Jesus announces: 'The time has come!'

Indeed, it's here, now!

If we are followers of Jesus, we can no longer say that the poor should be helped ... someday.

That exploitation should end ... someday.

That the planet must be healed ... someday.

That we study war no more ... someday.

In Jesus, the prophet Isaiah's dream of good news for the poor, for prisoners and the blind, for the oppressed and those broken by debt – that dream is fulfilled.

Today!

And it's fulfilled so long as TODAY, we are willing to cancel debts.

To forgive.

To treat enemies with compassion.

To share our bread with the hungry and our clothes with the naked.

To invite outcasts to dinner.

To confront oppressors not with guns, but with non-violent resistance.

No wonder Jesus calls people to repent.

If this bizarre kingdom is at hand, we need to change!" McClaren, A New Kind of Christianity, (pp. 139-40) paraphrased, modified.

But can we?

It was GK Chesterton who said that:

"Christianity has not been tried and found wanting.

Christianity has been wanted, but rarely tried."

As we make our way into the third decade of the 21st century, with warning signs everywhere about conflict and dire circumstances, perhaps it's finally time to try out our faith for real.

Imagine what could happen if we do.

For example, "what if our religious communities started organizing for the common good?

What if leaders of every faith tradition actually meet with one another?

Not for 'inter-religious dialogue,' but to discover in one another friendship, companionship, solidarity?

What if our bishops show up in person when politicians start saber rattling?

Bringing the power of faith to insist that those with power use it for the common good?

What if the 'haves' come to see the 'have-nots' as their blood relatives?

What if organized religion organizes billions of people and trillions of dollars to reform our economic and political systems?

Systems that politicians are afraid or unwilling to tackle.

Like a planet ravaged by unsustainable human behavior.

Maybe then, people will say: 'That's what religion looks like!'

Impossible?

Perhaps.

And yet, with God, all things are possible!

Maybe that's what Jesus means when he says to us today: 'The kingdom of God is at hand.'

It's not 'in hand.'

It's 'at hand.'

It's not out of reach.

But it's not fully embraced either.

It's attainable.

But only if we have the faith to grab it.

To unwrap it.

And then to live it out in this broken world.

With all the power that this kingdom offers." Id (pp. 250-52),
paraphrased and modified.

For too many years we have spiritualized and sentimentalized the
message of Jesus.

Trading in his challenge to make a better world for our versions of
progress and prosperity.

Pushing off into the next life the dream of God's kingdom.

But any fair reading of the gospels says that this move is badly
mistaken.

God made this world for reasons we cannot know.

But for some reason, we're to participate in the grand scheme of
God's creation.

Which means, this life matters.

These bodies matter.

The goal of creation isn't a disembodied soul.

It's the resurrected body!

While we struggle with the physical becoming spiritual, God whispers that the real beauty is when the spiritual becomes physical.

That our destiny is resurrection is revealed when Jesus cooks a beachside barbecue for his friends.

When he eats the fish handed to him by those same friends.

Yet this same Jesus moves through walls.

Then walks to Emmaus incognito.

Until he breaks the bread.

And there he is.

And then he's gone.

God is going to do something with our bodies.

And with this world.

And with this life.

Which means that every human being is much more than they appear to be.

Can we, as CS Lewis urges us, see in the stream of humanity a society of potential gods and goddesses?

“That even the dullest, most uninteresting person you know, may one day become that which, if you saw it now, your first impulse would be to bow down in worship?

All day long we are helping each other to this magnificent destination.

It's in the light of this overwhelming hope that we should conduct all of our dealings with one another.

Because there are no ordinary people.

You have never talked to a mere mortal.

Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is fleeting.

But it's immortals with whom we joke.

Work.

Marry.

Snub and exploit.

Every person is an everlasting splendor.” paraphrased and modified.

Can we, today, recommit ourselves to a gospel life?

Can we, today, be good news to the poor?

A light to the blind?

If we live out our faith, trusting in God's Spirit to empower all we do, why, who knows but politicians might just talk policy rather than prejudice!

And the unraveling seams of our nation might just discover the new stitching of harmony, justice and dignity for all.

As we long for the day when the lion and lamb lay down together.

When war shall be no more.

+amen.