

SERMON OXLEY 2ND FEBRUARY 2014

EPIPHANY 4

Matt 5 1-12

1 Cor 1: 18-31

Do you ever feel like a dinosaur? Well, that's the way the world often portrays Christians. We are continually being told that we are dinosaurs; that we belong to the past: that we are clinging to legends belonging to a pre-scientific past; that no intelligent, educated, progressive modern person can believe in a God who comes to earth in human flesh, and in that human form dies on a Cross and rises again.

And who can believe, they say, that the way to get ahead is to be humble and to put the interests of others ahead of your own ? Don't you know that if you adopt that attitude, you will be trampled underfoot and be left way behind the front of the pack?

The epistle reading for today tells us what the world thinks of what we believe. Paul tells the Corinthian Christians in very blunt terms. The world believes that the message about the Cross is foolishness. And of course the Cross is the heart and centre of the Church's message.

Well, if we keep hearing that the world regards our beliefs as nonsense, and as foolish, archaic, legendary stuff from a primitive past, often enough, we might be tempted to believe that the world is right. We might begin to feel like dinosaurs.

Well, is the world right? Today's gospel reading begins a series of teachings by Jesus traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount. They are really a sort of crash course given by Jesus to his disciples on the values of the Kingdom of God. Throughout these

teachings, he talks to them about the people who have most to gain from the kingdom, and those who have most to fear from the kingdom. He talks about how they are to relate to the world, about anger, adultery, divorce, how we are to treat our enemies, prayer, how to avoid worrying and so on.

If you wanted to know whether the Church was antiquated, the Sermon on the Mount, wouldn't be a bad place to find out. We tend to judge any group or movement by the ethical and moral behaviour of its adherents. How do they treat others? Are they people of good character? For example, some bikie clubs have been judged by the Queensland Government to be so corrupt, so closely associated with criminal behaviour, that they should be banned.

It would be a foolhardy atheist who, after reading the Sermon on the Mount, would conclude that people adhering to its teaching, deserve a low mark for their ethical and moral behaviour.

But what about the question of whether the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is something a modern, educated, progressive person of the 21st century could wholehearted espouse? How does that teaching fit in with contemporary society? How can the generation whose world is defined by computers, iPhones, online shopping, global economics, and space exploration, identify with this teaching?

Well, let's have a look at today's gospel reading, the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, and see whether they can be made to belong to the present, or whether they are a carry over from the past. Jesus after all was an uneducated carpenter from a rural village in an outpost of the Roman Empire. Can his teaching resonate with a person belonging to what is possibly the most educated and advanced generation in history?

Bear in mind the context of this teaching. Jesus has been baptised by his cousin John. He hears a voice from Heaven which in effect is God calling him to his mission. He then goes into the wilderness to reflect on that mission. He is tempted to go about his mission in some wrong ways, but he renounces them all.

Having decided that there are no quick and easy ways to conduct his mission, Jesus begins the task for which he had come. He made his home at Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee and began to announce that God was about to start building his kingdom on planet earth. If people wanted to enter it, they would need to turn away from sinning and commit themselves to living according to the ethical and moral principles of that kingdom.

But his mission was not just a verbal one. Words on their own would not be enough. There would be action as well. It would be almost three years before the kingdom really got off the ground. It would need the Cross and Resurrection for that to happen. But in the meantime there would be signs given that the process of the Kingdom's arrival was already under way. Jesus went through Galilee, not only teaching, but healing the sick, the mentally ill, the epileptics and paralytics. The power of God that was to be seen in the coming kingdom was being anticipated in the signs and wonders that Jesus was performing in Galilee. They were pointing forward to the resurrection and with it, the bursting forth on the human scene of the Kingdom of God in all its might and glory.

But no mission of any substance can be carried out solo, and there was never a mission with a greater substance than this. Jesus had to have helpers. He gathered around him twelve disciples of varying backgrounds, and then began to prepare them for the task ahead.

What we have to bear in mind is this. These disciples were to help to move the mission forward not only when Jesus was with them, but also when he was gone. It was not going

to be a short term mission, but knowing what we know now, it would continue for thousands of years. These men would have to lay down the foundations, and they would have to be pretty good ones if the mission was to last for thousands of years, and spread to every country in the world.

So, thorough instruction was needed and the Master teacher was there to give it. Now, you would think that Jesus would have started with the way the king of the kingdom, God himself, wanted his subjects to behave. Later on in his discourse he does that, but first he does something else. He talks about various groups of people, and the joy they are going to find in the Kingdom

When we look at these groups, we find something that might surprise us, or might have surprised us when we first seriously thought about this passage. All the groups that Jesus talks about comprise people who are suffering in one way or another. The poor in spirit. This is a picture of a person for whom this life has little to offer. People who are mourning the passing of a loved one. The meek, namely those who are most likely to get least when the goods of this world are shared. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They are the ones who yearn to see a world full of goodness, and who despair that they will ever see it. The merciful. They are the ones who are kind and gentle and have their good nature taken advantage of. The pure in heart. Those whose goodness makes them most offended by the sin of the world. The peacemakers. These are the people who work hard to create a society in which universal harmony prevails. More often than not, such people know the agony of being defeated in their endeavours. And finally, those who are persecuted for their loyalty to God.

All these people suffer in one way or another in this sinful world, . They suffer because that's the way the world is. There are winners and losers. We all get given a different hand in the game of life. Well, Jesus tells his disciples, these are the sort of people who stand to gain most in the kingdom shortly to be launched.

Well, our atheistic friends might say to us, society today looks after these sort of people without needing to bring God into the picture. We have all sorts of social service to protect the most needy people in our community. We have counsellors to comfort the bereaved. We have tribunals that can hear cases of exploitation of any kind. We punish evildoers, so we are doing what we can to create a society in which goodness is enhanced. We have tribunals that arbitrate in disputes. We have anti-vilification laws that forbid persecution of adherents of any religion.

This may be true. But do our atheist friends know just how many of our humane institutions were founded by Christians? The noted British theologian, Vishal Mangalwadi, who was in Australia on a lecture tour recently, has done an amazing analysis of the contribution Christians have made to the development of a humane and civilised society. In almost every department of life, the Christian faith has been the inspiration and motivator of ground-breaking advances in education, science, the care of the needy, and so on. Doctrines such as the Creation by a God who is outside that Creation, man being made in the image of God, God coming in human form to rescue man - all these have given a world view that is unique among all the religions and philosophies. It has been people with that world view who have pioneered the advances in the humane society. Without the Christian faith, says Mangalwadi, the world would be a far darker place than it is now.

So you see: the bible is not a collection of antiquated fables but God's eternal truth. It undergirds the kingdom. It inspires people of God in every generation to work to build the new world that will be fully realised at the return of Christ. It keeps pointing us to the end of this age. It is the opposite of outdated. It is futuristic, looking forward always to the time when God will be all and in all.

In the meantime, we who are Christ's are called to live as if the end has already come. We

are to live lives that point to how people will be in the realised kingdom. The church is to be a model of how society will be in the new creation. We are to treat each other as brothers and sisters. We are to reach out to care for one another without needing to be persuaded to do so. And we will want to naturally because we have seen Jesus crucified on the cross and raised from the dead. We believe that he lives within us, armed with the power that raised him from the dead. And he has instructed us with the Sermon on the Mount and his other teachings as to what sort of society he wants us to build. No, we are not dinosaurs. We are people of the future because we have been told how the drama of humanity is going to end.