

Third Sunday after Epiphany, 24th January 2021

Haddington West with Garvald and Morham

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

“The time has arrived; the kingdom of God is upon you. Repent and believe the gospel.” Mk.1,15

Prayer -

Living God, the giver of life, we worship and adore you. You commanded all things into existence; and gave humanity its first breath; even now you are at work in your world, creating, sustaining, renewing. New life is your never-ending gift to us. Creating, sustaining, life-giving God, we praise and adore you, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Father, we are not satisfied with our lives; we live as though you were not with us. Forgive our failure to accept the abundant life offered to us in Jesus Christ. You know our lives; you know our dissatisfaction with them. We long for them to be better; we need your life-changing power. Give us grace to amend our lives and strengthen our resolve to follow you. So may we live the abundant life which you have promised can be ours.

Merciful Lord, grant to your faithful people pardon that we may be cleansed from all our sins and serve you with a quiet spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *AMEN*

God the Father of creation

1. God the Father of Creation,
source of life and energy,
your creative love so shapes us
that we share your liberty.
Teach us how to use this freedom
loving children all to be.

2. Jesus Christ our Lord and brother,
in your cross we see the way
to be servants for each other,
caring, suffering every day.
teach us patience and obedience
never from your path to stray.

3. Holy Spirit, love that binds us
to the Father and the Son,
giver of the joy that fills us,
yours the peace that makes us one,
teach our hearts to be more open
so to pray ‘God’s will be done.’

4. Members of our Saviour’s body,
here on earth his life to be,
though we stand as different people,
may we share the unity
of the Father, Son and Spirit,
perfect love in Trinity.

Mk.1,14-20

After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!'

As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will send you out to fish for people.' At once they left their nets and followed him. When he had gone a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John in a boat, preparing their nets. Without delay he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

Dear friends

We often think around the question of what is a good time for doing something. When is a good time, for instance, to make a certain announcement so as to get maximal effect? We conduct our affairs very much with an eye on whether time and circumstance favour the outcome we seek or whether they don't.

This being so let it puzzle us, and give us pause to reflect on the difference of God's timing, when we notice that Jesus stepped out with the announcement '*The kingdom of God has come near*' at a time which was not particularly favourable to it. John, who had prepared the way for Jesus, had been thrown into prison, and worse was to befall him. Jesus himself would not fare better: little welcome for the good news and an end on the cross after only a short period of ministry. From a human perspective the time and circumstance were not favourable to the gospel that Jesus preached. If it depended on that, God could surely have picked a better, more suitable, time. Yes, there was a widespread expectation that a new kingdom, that of the promised Messiah, was soon to come (just about to (!), book of Daniel), but it was not the kind of expectation into which Jesus and the gospel then easily fitted or that made sure he had a ready reception.

I draw attention to this because you hear it often said that it is harder now for the gospel to reach people; that whereas there was until recently a readiness for faith and church, there is now a very different situation – time and circumstance have become less favourable, and we have to find new ways to incline our times to hearing the gospel. The danger here is that we think the gospel requires a favourable time and circumstance and that it will be more readily received if we ensure that it does by creating that right time and circumstance for it. We assume that's how it was for Jesus, but it wasn't.

The good news appeared not in a way that sought to fit the times and conform to its ways, to appeal to the tastes and the spirit of the age so as to draw people in. Like something in captivity, the gospel fades, losing its power to save, when it is made to conform and be agreeable to the tastes and norms it finds. "*Blessed is the one who is not offended by me*", says Jesus (Mt.11,6). And we have to ask, don't we, why Jesus said this, that is, whether that which saves the sinner and brings salvation *can* be pleasing to the sinner on his own terms.

The good news appeared in God's times, it does so still; and it made its way against rejection and opposition, overcoming both and making peace. And still for us goes what Paul says in regard to this gospel (of the kingdom of God, of repentance and faith): "*I tell you, now is the time of God's favour, now is the day of salvation.*" (2Cor.6,2)

Now what this salvation is Jesus puts programmatically in these words: *“The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news.”* What is the kingdom of God? Why is it good news? Well, we can imagine ears pricking up when it was first announced: the end of Roman occupation and oppression, and that of Herod too! A new king in Jerusalem, on the throne of David – and one of their own! The dawn of prosperity and national sovereignty and power! Restoration and the return of glory for Israel!

But that is not what had come near, as it turned out. And we cannot, therefore, connect to the gospel – the good news, the kingdom of God – thoughts and expectations for ourselves of a similar nature.

But certainly the ‘kingdom’ has to do with what has power over us, what has the say and determines our fate, what we serve and whose we are; it has to do with domination, rule, government. Only that the focus is not on the outward but the inward, not on the flesh but on the spirit, as Paul says: *“Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God”* (1Cor.15,50), also Jesus: *“The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, “Here it is,” or “There it is,” because the kingdom of God is within you (or: is in your midst).* (Lk.17,20-21)

The phrase ‘the kingdom of God has come near’ announces to us that Jesus has come to bring freedom – freedom from foreign oppressive rule and domination, to set us free from those powers that so control us that we live our lives in service to ourselves, to the world with its various demands and claims and promises, but not to God. And these powers are those of sin and the death. But are they not precisely what the cross and resurrection of Jesus have come to deal with?

Jesus has come to liberate; to liberate us from sin and from death in such a way that we gain the freedom to serve God, which is our happiness and which is heaven.

All the healings he performed on his way to Golgotha pointed forward to cross and resurrection so that there we might understand and receive: Here you are freed from the domineering and controlling power that the fear of death and sin have over you; here is freedom from guilt, freedom from the way sin governs your desires and thoughts away from God in disobedience to his will and in obedience to the rule and will of evil (*“to do what ought not to be done”* -Rom.1,28, and see following); and here – in Christ Jesus – *you are made alive with him* (Eph.2,5).

Dear friends, it is a wonderful kingdom, this kingdom of God, and the good news of Jesus Christ is indeed good news. He calls us to it by repentance and faith. When we see that what is controlling us makes us do wrong, despise holiness, forget God and fail to love him and our neighbour, and say ‘I need to be freed!’, then we repent; when we take it to Jesus, then we believe. AMEN

Lord God, your love has called us here

Lord God, your love has called us here
as we, by love, for love were made.
Your living likeness still we bear,
though marred, dishonoured, disobeyed.
We come, with all our heart and mind
your call to hear, your love to find.

We come with self-inflicted pains
of broken trust and chosen wrong,
half-free, half-bound by inner chains,
by social forces swept along,
by powers and systems close confined
yet seeking hope for humankind.

Lord God, in Christ you call our name
and then receive us as your own,
not through some merit, right or claim,
but by your gracious love alone.
We strain to glimpse your mercy-seat
and find you kneeling at our feet.

Lord God, in Christ you set us free
your life to live, your joy to share.
Give us your Spirit's liberty
to turn from guilt and dull despair
and offer all that faith can do
while love is making all things new.

Prayer -

Lord God, your kingdom is not one that we make or an idea given to us that we should build it; it is a kingdom that makes us. You sent your Son in order to remake us in his image. The call to follow him is our entry into your kingdom – let that call come to us and let us hear it, so that we may know the ways of your kingdom and truly own them. Give us grace, we pray, to turn from our sins and to find in Jesus, seeking him always, the strength to obey your will. For we ask it in his name.

- time of prayer / intercession –

'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

May the light of the glorious Gospel of Christ shine in your hearts, transform your lives, and brighten the world.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you.

AMEN