

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole  
The Third Sunday after Epiphany  
Sunday, January 26<sup>th</sup> 2020

Isaiah 9:1-4

Psalm 27:1, 5-13

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Matthew 4:12-23

Well we had the Diocesan Convention yesterday. My thanks to the clergy and five delegates from Christ Church for attending. All conferences are a labor of love, but it is important that Christ Church is represented and I am most grateful to those who were there. We heard the Bishop speak about the Diocese's Strategic Plan to Revitalize, Inspire, and Partner in the coming months. Do check it out on the Diocesan Website. AS you know, we are beginning our own Strategic Plan process. We were also honored to have the Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry preaching in his own very distinctive and powerful charismatic style. It sort of feels to me like Evangelical Southern Baptist meets Liberal, open-hearted Episcopalian! Bishop Michael will also be speaking at the Diocesan Revival this afternoon. It is sold out, but I have couple of tickets if anyone would like to come and hear him. Doors open at 12.30 and the service starts at 2.00pm.

I should warn you that the Diocesan Website on the event warns that the following Items are prohibited:

- all food and beverages,
- Weapons of any kind (guns, knives, chains, spikes, projectiles, tasers, pepper spray, ammunition, etc.)
- Balloons, Frisbees, Inflatable Toys, Confetti Streamers
- Cans, bottles, or coolers
- Illegal drugs, drug paraphernalia, and flammable lighters of any kind
- Laser pointers
- Luggage, roller bags or bags larger than 13" long, 9.5" tall, and 6" wide;
- ALL backpacks are prohibited.

All these warnings show that we Episcopalians obviously have a reputation that precedes us!

One of the things Bishop Michael said did particularly resonate with me. He pointed out that our job is to bring people to Christ but not to insist that they have to become like us. And that is so true isn't it! Yesterday was the Conversion of St Paul, and on that road to Damascus, Paul, the Pharisee of Pharisees, was changed. Having been the great supporter of Jewish Law and every detail of the tradition, later, at the Council of Jerusalem, he was the one, who argued against those who insisted that all converts to Christ should be made to accept Jewish Law including circumcision. A wise move when you think about it! If you were an adult gentle male and you discovered that that was part of the deal you might think twice about it, then and today, might you not!

The point is that people who come to Christ don't have to become like us. Christ Church is a wonderful Church and many people are coming into its life here because of how we worship and what we do, and indeed because of what we do not do, but there are lots of other very different approaches out there where people can be just as faithful and just as much as part of Christ's body as we are. That is the glory of the Episcopal tradition. It contains real breadth. High and low, Evangelical and Liturgical, traditional and experimental. Episcopalians have a lot of choice and everyone from each one of these various approaches are very proud of them and would probably say, as my father used to jokingly say. "You worship God in your way and I will worship him in his!"

We are all different, and all love what we do, but we all belong to the Body of Christ. That is the point. God, like all good fathers of their Children, cares, I think, far less for the style and nature of the offering of love he gets from his children than he does for the intent at its heart.

"The land of Zeb'ulun and the land of Naph'tali,  
toward the sea, across the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles—  
the people who sat in darkness  
have seen a great light,  
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death  
light has dawned."

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

So much centers around that word “Kingdom”. What does it mean? is it here or is it coming? Whole libraries of theological works have been written about it. Today I want to say what little I can say in just a few minutes.

First let’s think about what it is not. Today’s Epistle gives a perfect example of what is not the Kingdom. Paul is telling the Corinthians that divisions, factions and tribalism are definitely not what the Kingdom is about. As we come to the end of the ‘Week of Prayer for Christian Unity’ we have been praying for an end to this kind of division and bickering. Sure, we all have our ecclesiastical cultures and preferences and ways of expressing our faith, but what Paul is saying is that, whatever ecclesiastical tribe you belong to, the fundamental unity, our principle shared identity must be found in Christ.

A secular analogy that speaks to me from my past service, is the experience of the many Regiments in an Army. They are all different. They all think they are the best. They all think they are better than all the rest, and yet, when it comes down to it, they all stand by each other, and, where necessary, are prepared to lay down their lives for, each other. The many are one.

The dream of America is the same isn’t it? That people come here from all over the world from many cultures and countries, but when they get here, they all become American. We don’t stop being where we are from, of course, we are proud of that, but, in the dream at least, we all become American, and that identity comes before any of the differences we have brought with us. The many, we dream and hope, are one.

Differences don’t have to mean divisions. Here at Christ Church we have people at different stages in life and people with different likes and different passions. We have lots of people who really love music. We also have about 100 people each week who choose services where there is no music at all. We have over 60 people on the Baby Wise list at the moment all of whom have babies just born or on the way, but we also have many more of us who, like me, are past that stage, and mostly pretty glad to be so! We have nearly 200 people who help in the Soup Kitchen and the Shelter but lots of others who don’t. Yet we are all united in our love of Christ and of this Parish family, and so of course we want the best for all these different groups, even if we are not part of them. We want the Children to be nurtured in the Church, the music to flourish, and the Feeding Ministries to grow even if we are not

part of any of those groups. We are united not in need or taste or particular passion, but we are united in Christ and our care for this family of faith. The many are one.

So, what is the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims? As Christ says in the Our Father, it is the place, the person, the community where God's will is done. In the scriptures two ideas are often placed alongside each other with a very deliberate purpose in this way, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done."

The Kingdom has been here since Christ. In the people who followed him from the beginning and in all the generations since. The Kingdom is here in us, in us, in this place. Not all the time, for we are less than perfect servants of God's will, but in moments. It blooms like unlooked for flowers in the garden of our lives. It comes whenever we repent, whenever we turn to Christ and look afresh at how we live and act. We are agents of the Kingdom one moment, and then, in the next, we are not, but in all these moments, we see glimpses of what is coming. The Kingdom that will be completely ours in the end at the end of our lives and at the end of time. So, however alien the revival that takes place this afternoon may be to a rather traditional Episcopalian like myself, I pray, for the wider Episcopalian family in this Diocese, that Christ's Kingdom will come in many hearts and lives today. And I pray for Christ Church, that the same may be true for each one of us.