

We cannot earn God's kingdom

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Year C 20th after Pentecost

I struggled with the readings this week. As I read through the passage from Joel and the passage from our psalm for today, I noticed the number of times that God's provision of rain is celebrated, and that rain is promised. This seemed to contrast so much with what I hear on the news at the moment. Theologian, Karl Barth, said that as Christians we should read with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. While it rained for us a little this week, it seems that every few days we hear about another town that is about to or has already run out of drinking water. It seems strange that a thing like this could happen in a country like Australia, people being thirsty, people having nothing to drink. First, it was the crops and the livestock who were thirsty, now it is the farmers themselves. We know that we live in a dry country, a land of drought and flooding rains, but at the moment we could certainly make do with some more rains.

So as I read that "God tends with earth and waters it" in the psalm, and as I read "O children of Zion, be glad and rejoice in the Lord your God; for he has given the early rain for your vindication, he has poured down for you abundant rain, the early and the later rain, as before." I wondered what it must be like for our brothers and sisters in the country to be hearing those words this morning.

In the first three of our readings today how people are doing in their physical life and abundance seems to be closely linked to God's will and blessing. We find this often in the Old Testament but in 2 Timothy we also see Paul giving thanks to God for his life. If you remember, Paul has been through quite a bit, he has been stoned, he has been left for dead,

he's been bitten by a deadly snake, and that's just to name a few. However, in spite of all of this, Paul is still around, at least for a little while longer, and he attributes this to God's desire for him to continue in the mission of sharing the good news of Jesus with the Gentiles.

But what is the good news of Jesus for those who have no rain, what is Jesus' viewpoint in our readings today between material, or watery blessing and the faithfulness of a person?

In our Gospel reading today we are met with two stories, both of which are probably pretty familiar to those of us who have been in church for a while. The first is the account of the people bringing their babies to Jesus, the second is that of the rich ruler.

I'd like to start with the question of the ruler. This man who came to Jesus to ask what he must do to inherit eternal life – to be part of God's Kingdom. Jesus first quotes part of the law back to him to which he replies that he has kept all of these. So Jesus continues, telling him one more thing – that he should sell all that he owns and distribute the money to the poor. Then he will have this treasure in heaven and should come and follow Jesus. It is care for others, charity, that Jesus requires of this man. That the rich should be generous, that the rich should share with the poor, that the rich should accept downward mobility.

But this ruler is sad and the reason that we are given for this is that he is wealthy, he is wealthy and attached to his wealth. Jesus points out that it is hard for the wealthy to enter God's kingdom, hard, but not impossible as we are reminded later in the Gospel. The disciples are surprised. See, just like our other readings tend to, they associated richness with God's blessing, surely a rich person would be able to enter God's Kingdom. But no, says Jesus, for the rich it is hard. Jesus does not connect God's physical blessing in wealth to God's care for people. In fact, biblical scholar,

Christopher Hay explains that the passages of Luke that we have been reading for the past few weeks are passages that are endorsing downward mobility.

This is where I want to take us back to the children coming to Jesus. See, Jesus says that to enter God's Kingdom we must come like these little children. If you're anything like me you might read this as being innocent, or naïve but when we read this in the context of God's care for the poor and God's desire for generosity, we read it differently. A baby has nothing to give in exchange for something. I'm at a stage of life at the moment where there seem to be babies everywhere, and as you know, they don't earn money – they cost money; they don't thank you for caring for them – they expect it, they don't even let you sleep through the night! A baby has nothing to give, a baby isn't looking for a fair exchange, a baby can only repay kindness by giggles and smiles and love. If a baby is anything like my 17-month-old niece they might repay you playing with them through a literal kick in the teeth and then giggle – but that's not my point. Babies have no capacity to earn or pay for what they need. So, when we are to come like a baby, we are to come as one who recognises that we cannot earn God's kingdom, that we cannot repay God for this gift, we can only give out love and affection. This can be hard for the rich to accept.

The disciples had to abandon their idea that the rich were more blessed than the poor and this ruler had to abandon his values of comfort, to abandon his safety net of riches, to engage in radical generosity. What might we need to abandon on our journey to follow Jesus? What might we need to change in ourselves in order to follow Jesus in his call to radical generosity? As we see just a chapter later, when Jesus meets Zacchaeus and dines with him the response of Zacchaeus is to engage in radical generosity – repaying those he defrauded four-fold and giving half his money to the poor. The point of the story of the ruler is not that wealth is bad, but that it

cannot save us that that following Jesus should lead to radical generosity. It is then, when we have given it away, that we realise that our wealth cannot save us and we can enter God's kingdom like a baby.

So, what do we learn? I think we can learn that this drought is not some kind of punishment upon people by God, but I am challenged by the call to radical generosity and charity that we receive from Jesus in our Gospel reading.

In a world where water is scarce and people are paying thousands of dollars simply to ship in water to drink, what does generosity look like for those whose taps run? For those whose income is not dependent upon the rainfall. Is it possible that it is we who are this rich ruler in this situation? In a world where there is famine and drought and severe weather, what might downward mobility look like so that we can engage in generosity with others?

As we adventure in following Jesus, may God help us to see how we can engage in radical generosity.