

Faith in the Kingdom

St Brandon's

Hebrews 11:1-3,8-16, Luke 12:32-40

7 August 2022

It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:
Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is
Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission
Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.

That's a poem by R. S. Thomas, a great 20th Century Christian poet, and it's called 'The Kingdom'. So "It's a long way off" and all the rest refer to the Kingdom of God. And it seemed to me that it linked well with our two readings this morning. In our Gospel reading Jesus told His disciples that it was their Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom, and He then went on to describe some of the implications of that – what His disciples were expected to do in response.

Our reading from Hebrews was, of course, all about faith – what it is, how Abraham (and indeed Sarah) exercised it, and how all people of faith look forward to and desire a better country. And that links both to the poem's beginning – "It's a long way off" – and to its end – "the simple offering of your faith, green as a leaf".

So with that as context, let me read the poem, 'The Kingdom', again. *[If you're reading this, read the poem again yourself!]*

I was then in two minds as to whether to work from the readings to the poem, or from the poem to the readings. In the end I opted to go from the poem to the readings, and to try to draw out the similarities and, to some degree, the differences between them. And in doing so, of course, to try to work out what all of this might mean for us, and the living out of our faith today.

"It's a long way off", as the poem begins, suggests that we have some way to travel to get to the Kingdom, or that there is some way to go before the Kingdom is realised. But that seems to contrast both with what Jesus said to His disciples – that it was the Father's good pleasure to give them the kingdom, implying a certain immediacy: "here it is" – and with the foundational message that both John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed – "Repent, for the

kingdom of heaven [kingdom of God] has come near” (Matt. 3:2; 4:17). It’s present in the world.

But the poem returns to that same phrase, “It’s a long way off”, and the second time offers a different perspective: “but to get there takes no time and admission is free”. So we seem to have here a ‘both/and’ rather than an ‘either/or’: yes, the Kingdom is near, indeed immediate (it takes no time), and real here and now. And yet the Kingdom is also still a long way off.

And it is a long way off in two different ways I think. First, because we don’t always, or even very often, see the ways of the Kingdom realised in our time – we’ll come back to that. And second because, with the eye of faith, we are always looking for that “better country, a heavenly one” where God has prepared a city for us, as it says in Hebrews. We know the Kingdom, realised in all its fullness, is still a long way off. But, so we learn from our Hebrews reading, one aspect of our faith is to keep believing in that fulfilment of God’s Kingdom, that it will come, that all will be well in the end, never to give up on that.

And if we maintain that long-term perspective, that ultimate realisation of the Kingdom, then surely it follows that our faith should also involve seeking the realisation of the Kingdom here and now, however limited that might be in comparison with its ultimate fulfilment. After all, Jesus instructs us to pray, ‘Your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’. Here, now – and to get there takes no time.

But what does the Kingdom look like when it comes here and now? What “quite different things are going on” in the Kingdom compared with the world around? Well the poem includes four different things.

First, that there are festivals! The Kingdom involves celebration, but celebration at which the poor man is king. And this is not just king for a day, but a permanent state: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is [in perpetuity] the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3) says Jesus at the beginning of the Beatitudes. And I think this links to what Jesus tells us in our gospel reading, “Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”, says Jesus, inviting us both to elevate the poor man (give alms), and to become poor ourselves to the world’s goods so that, paradoxically, we might also become kings in the festivals of the Kingdom. Have I, have we, taken all that on board seriously in my, in our faith journeys?

Second, the poem includes that as part of these festivals (there are lots of them!) “the consumptive is healed”. We probably still associate consumption with tuberculosis, but surely the poem is pointing to a much broader understanding. There is a sense in which our whole contemporary culture suffers from, and is suffocated by consumption, or rather over-consumption.¹ It can even be argued that it is this over-consumption which is at the root of

¹ This is taken from Malcolm Guite’s *Lifting the Veil. Imagination and the Kingdom of God*, Canterbury Press, 2022, p.84. I am grateful more generally for his insights into this poem.

climate change and its associated effects. But in the Kingdom the consumptive is healed. Have I, have we, taken on board what this healing might mean for me, for us in our faith journeys, both in our own consumption and in our actions to try to limit the over-consumption of the world?

Third, the poem includes that one of the quite different things that is going on in the Kingdom is that there are “mirrors in which the blind look / At themselves and love looks at them / Back”. The blind see! And can see themselves in a mirror perhaps for the first time! The poem here is picking up those words from Isaiah which Jesus quotes at the beginning of His ministry – “He sent me to proclaim ... recovery of sight to the blind” (Luke 4:18). And more than this, in the Kingdom “love looks at them / Back”. Not only can the blind see, but they are seen, and known, by love. And here, the poem is picking up George Herbert’s “Love bade me welcome”, and reassuring us of God’s (Love’s) knowledge of us and His love for us. And, of course, all of us are blind, all of us need to be healed of our blindness, all of us need to hold up mirrors to be able to see ourselves perhaps truly for the first time, and all of us need to know that, as we do so, love looks us at back in whatever state we may be in. Have I, have we taken on board what that might mean for me, for us in our faith journeys?

Fourth, the poem includes the, at first sight, odd words, “and industry is for mending / The bent bones and the minds fractured / By life. Again there’s a play on words here, with “industry” meaning both our own work, the ways in which we are industrious, and industry as in commercial activity. And again, in the Kingdom, here is a quite different thing going on, where our own work, and that of our commercial organisations, is directed not towards consumption and profit, but to mending bent bones and fractured minds, to mending the injuries of life. Have I, have we, in our industry both personal and commercial, taken on board what that might mean for us in our faith journeys?

Well probably by now we’re all feeling that any one of these, let alone all of them, is / are too big an ask, too much to take on board. It does seem as though “it’s a long way off”, too difficult to achieve. But, by way of reassurance, the poem then tells us that “to get / There takes no time and admission / Is free”. It is our Father’s good pleasure to give us the Kingdom. But it does need some response from us: “if you purge yourself / Of desire, and present yourself with / Your need only and the simple offering / Of your faith, green as a leaf”.

And these, of course, link back to the first part of the poem: purging ourselves of those distorted desires that lead to over-consumption; presenting our needs as those who are blind and need to receive sight, while knowing that Love looks at us back. And then all that is needed is a simple offering of our faith. Don’t overcomplicate it. Keep it simple. Offer it, as green – naive and childlike – as it might be. But also offer it green as a leaf, attached to the true vine that gives it life.

The Kingdom in all its fulness is a long way off. But it will come. And to get there takes no time and admission is free. And we can and do see, and can work for the coming of the

Kingdom on earth, in the here and now in our own lives and in the life of the world. All it takes is a simple offering of our faith. A faith that is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not [yet] seen”.

Amen