

## **'Among Us'**

(Luke 17:20) "Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming and he answered, "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed."

Recently I was a member of a panel interviewing candidates for a case worker position in a local charity. The calibre of candidates was very high, so we knew that it was going to be a challenge to choose between them. The final part of the interview was the opportunity for each candidate to ask questions of the panel, and most of them raised practical issues, such as the flexibility of working hours and holiday entitlement. But the last person being interviewed had very different questions to be addressed; she asked about the ideological foundation of the organisation and our vision for the future of its work. The questions were so profound and insightful that suddenly we realised that 'the boot was on the other foot' – she was interviewing us! (She got the job).

The Pharisees in the Gospel account were asking a very significant question that day, when they said to Jesus, "When is the Kingdom of God coming?" We do not know why they asked that particular question on that particular day, but what is known is that the Kingdom of God, the world living under God's rule, was a 'hot topic' of the time, as a consequence there were many beliefs and understandings, as well as disagreements and divisions, about when, where and how the Kingdom of God was going to come. So maybe the Pharisees were testing Jesus to see what side of the argument he took, but what they got in response was so profound and insightful that it went to the heart of the matter, as Jesus announced Good News: "The Kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say (for they cannot say) 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!', for, in fact, the Kingdom of God is among us."

Some Bibles have the final words of verse 21 translated as "the Kingdom of God is within you", which raises the challenging issue of the need for us to claim God's rule in our lives so that we epitomise, personify, live out the Kingdom of God each and every day. But pushed too far, "the Kingdom of God is within you" can imply a private, individualistic and exclusive theology. The Revised Standard Version translates the end of the verse as "the Kingdom of God is among you", which offers a very different theology; this is an understanding of God and the values of God's rule which get to the heart of Jesus' Good News. The Kingdom of God - how God wants the world to live - is realised between us, is discovered in community, is found together: "for, in fact, the Kingdom of is among us."

At the end of January, I had the privilege of accompanying members of the Zimbabwean Fellowships in Britain to an international conference held in Braunfels, Germany. The conference was hosted by the United Methodist Church of Europe, and it had a focus on what was described as 'migrant ministry', which included work with refugees, asylum seekers and global communities. Entitled 'The tie that binds us – what still keeps us apart?' the conference revealed sources of both concern and hope, with contradictory theologies being expressed, but all grounded in a common belief that God's grace is for all people and that was the gateway to the Kingdom of God on earth.

This summer I have beaten my record of the number of students I have had on placement with me, as I managed to have three on the go at once! Two students from the Queen's Foundation were supported by Ruth Yorke and me, but the third was an American intern from Boston. I was keen to offer this Bostonian a rich variety of experiences from different aspects of British life, so on one occasion I treated him to a 'slap-up' meal in the Bull Ring open market. Alongside our sausage and chips, we were entertained by a street evangelist who condemned us all to hell. If that wasn't bad enough for our digestive systems, the evangelist went on predict the end of the world – but Jesus said, "Nor will they say (for they cannot say) 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!'" because the way that God wants the world to live, God's rule of life, the Kingdom of God is more about encounter than observation, more about offering than receiving, more about us than me, because the Kingdom of God is among us!

This is Good News for the world today, a message that gets to the heart of the matter and so needs to be heard, as need increases in our society and across the world; when millions cry out for freedom, while others want security, yet all are seeking hope, hope of a better world. In this present world of ours, we have a Gospel to proclaim, the Good News of a better world, offering hope to the hopeless...and it begins with us.

"Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the Kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "Coming? It has come, the Kingdom of God is here, among us."

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September 2018.