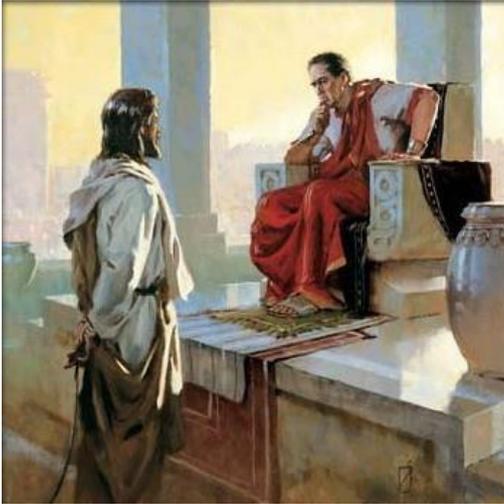


Highfield Rd Uniting Church

The kingdom not of this world

John 18:33 -37



“My kingdom is not of this world.”

Hollywood has had a fascination with supernatural movies and TV shows for a long time now. And, in fact, they are working off European myths and superstitions stretching back hundreds of years. But what always makes me laugh is how convenient it is that these supernatural - and always evil - creatures or demons have an exploitable real-world weakness. Wooden stakes for vampires, silver bullets for werewolves and, most laughable, salt across the doorway and windowsills to keep out demons. If the evil is *supernatural*, how is it that

something natural can be a weapon or a defence? And we can laugh. Not just at the silly superstitions of vampires and werewolves and demons, but at this simplicity, at this half-formed metaphysics. We understand the division of God’s universe that is implicit in Jesus’ statement to Pilate - “My kingdom is not of this world.” Or do we? From the extreme of literal evangelical theology that claims to be the only truth, and the only expression of the kingdom, to the extremes of progressive theology that rejects anything supernatural, the church has a long and wide history of misunderstanding the kingdom of God.

And I can understand that misunderstanding; the one who said, “My kingdom is not of this world” was saying that in this world! So, there are some issues to work through; some levels of mystery to navigate.

Jesus spent a lot of time and teaching in trying to get across the concept of the kingdom of God. Most of that teaching was in parables; “the kingdom of God is like ...” And most of those parables are as deep and multilayered and mysterious today as they were when Jesus first told them. Is the parable of the mustard seed about growing a community of love that can help other people, or is it about each of us maturing and growing in faith and love? Is the parable of the pearl calling us to sell all we have, to follow Jesus, or is it about setting our life priorities by the will of God?

However, the fundamental point of the kingdom is not so much that it is about living according to love and mercy that follows the way of God, but that it is living according to love and mercy that follows the way of *GOD*. This is not just Jesus teaching a better way to live, like some first century self-help guru. Jesus was clearly teaching that there are two parallel existences - God’s realm and the world’s realm. When the heavens break open at Jesus’ baptism and the spirit descends like a dove, that’s not a dove that just happened to fly through. He confounded the Sadducees by interpreting God’s name - I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - as an example of people still being alive after death. Not I was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is, in the Gospel stories, a reality to God’s reality. And it is not just first century Jewish religious culture or understanding.

I know that there are many who find it hard to get their heads around this, but is it any different to modern physics and cosmology that talks of parallel dimensions? And not just parallel but co-existent dimensions. Pick up a copy of New Scientist and have your mind stretched by discussions of parallel dimensions, the problems of time only flowing in one direction, quantum physics questioning the existence of reality, and whether the origin of the universe was really something from nothing. It seems that science is running into the same questions and barriers that the ancients did - it is impossible to explain this universe from within the framework of this universe, there is always the need for an outside answer. Science has not eliminated the supernatural, it has just renamed and reframed it. When Jesus says, "My kingdom is not of this world", he is pointing to the realm of God that is waiting to break into this realm. Understanding the kingdom of God is not just about balancing a concept of spirituality with living in the real world, it is about including the reality of God's realm within our understanding of physical reality. For those of us with a Celtic background, that makes sense because it is at the heart of Celtic spirituality - not two diverse realms but God's unifying presence in both. For other cultures it may be difficult because physical reality is so dominant - that's why we call it reality.

The one who said, "My kingdom is not of this world" was saying that *in* this world, as a real, active agent of that kingdom. The kingdom is much more than an airy-fairy concept of spirituality. Again, this is not just Jesus teaching a better way to live, like some first century self-help guru. The one who created us is teaching us the way we are meant to live - the kingdom of God is the outflowing into this world of people aligning themselves with God's intention for humanity - an intention expressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Mark only uses the title 'Son of David' once for Jesus, and I think that is because he wanted to avoid all that genealogy and pick up the alternate definition of 'Son of David' - the one chosen to be king. The Books of Kings showed that Israel went wrong because they gave up finding God's choice for king and chose the king in other ways. Jesus is God's choice as King of this kingdom. The message is not 'live better, more loving lives' but 'live with Jesus as the God-given example and reference'. Just as he lived a life that was an expression of the kingdom of God - grace, mercy, forgiveness, love, and humble service of others - so that kingdom can break into our world through our willingness to follow that way of living.

We cannot confine or define God's kingdom, or Christ's kingdom, with our cathedrals, or denominations, or creeds, or theologies; that would mean that we were trying to make the kingdom 'of this world'. When the Apostle Paul stood up in Athens and referred to the Statue for an Unknown God, he understood that he was not the certified agent of a potted kingdom he was carrying to the pagans, but a catalyst for God's kingdom that can and will break in wherever people turn to God. This is a reality that the Uniting Church embraces in the Preamble - the Spirit was present and active in Australia before the missionaries and evangelists arrived. It's not our kingdom, it's the kingdom of God, open to all who find truth and faith in and through Jesus, the King. It's not a kingdom that we can define or control, but it is a kingdom that, once we truly live in it, can allow us to see the working of the Spirit in so many places and circumstances outside our limits of membership and community.

The supernatural world of myth and superstition may be laughable to us, but let it be laughable not because supernatural is impossible, but because it's a sad distortion of the reality of God's realm - the rule of grace and love that has brought about the inbreaking of the kingdom into this world through the cross. Beyond our labels of theology and denomination, let us be kingdom people living in the light and example of Jesus the King of the kingdom of God.