

The Difference Between Our World and God's World

Sermon for St Pauls 9 Mar 2003

Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson go on a camping trip, set up their tent, and fall asleep. Some hours later, Holmes wakes his faithful friend.

“Watson, look up at the sky and tell me what you see.”

Watson replies, “I see millions of stars.”

“What do you deduce from that?”

Watson ponders for a minute. “Well, Astronomically speaking, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and potentially billions of planets, that we are in one tiny corner of the Milky Way.

“Astrologically speaking, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo, that tomorrow will be a good day to meet strangers, and that your lucky number is 7.

“Chronologically speaking, it appears to be approximately a quarter past three in the morning.

“Theologically speaking, I deduce that the Lord is the all-powerful Creator and we are small and insignificant.

“Meteorologically speaking, I deduce we will have a beautiful day tomorrow. What do you deduce, Holmes?”

Holmes is silent for a moment, then speaks. “Watson, someone has stolen our tent.”

Friends, there is a point to this story. Today I want to talk about the difference between our world, and God's world. The difference between the Kingdom of the World, and the Kingdom of God. I want to suggest that there is an *enormous* difference between the Kingdom of the World, and the Kingdom of God.

And yet, because we are called as Christians to live **in** the world, but not belong to the world, we are often deceived. We're deceived into accepting the values of the world, as if they are God's values. We are often deceived into believing in the world's standards, thinking they are God's standards.

I want to suggest that living according to God's Kingdom calls us into a radical stance away from the world's values. I want to suggest that this world is not our home. Our true home lies in the Kingdom of God. And the Kingdom of God is another place altogether.

When we lived in Vienna, I used to regularly see an advertising sign on the drive back to our flat from the airport. The sign was just on the edge of Vienna city on the freeway. The sign read “Wien ist anders.” Vienna is different.

Well, I reckon that's what it should feel like to live in the Kingdom of God. Like living in a place that's different from the rest of the world. In fact, I want to suggest that the Kingdom of God is literally like no place on earth.

The story about Holmes, Watson and the missing tent might help us to see something. Often the world's categories blind us from truth. So, if something I say this morning seems a bit off the planet, think about Holmes, Watson and the meaning of the sky.

In our Gospel reading today, John 17, we hear about living in God's Kingdom. Jesus is talking with his father about the things that are important to him. These prayers are often called "The Passion of Jesus". We call it the passion because Jesus is praying about the things that are most important to him, these are the things about which he is most passionate. And what is that passion? I think it may be summarised at the end of verse 22 where Jesus prays that we might be one, as he and God are one. God wants us to live in relationship.

In God's kingdom, we are invited to live in a world of relationship. Intimate relationship. Ken has been reminding us of the ways in which we can develop the kind of intimate relationship with God. The relationship that God invites us to have with him. The kind of intimacy that Jesus himself had with his Father. It is on that relationship that the Kingdom of God is built.

And it creates a world of living that is so much different from the kingdom of the world. We become like refugees in a foreign land. We are in the kingdom of the world, but we don't belong to it. And the result is that the world may hate us. Jesus says back in verse 14, that the world hated his followers because "they do not belong to the world, as I do not belong to the world."

Vienna might be different from the rest of the world (the Viennese certainly are). But a kingdom based on a relationship with God is so much more different from the kingdom of the world. God's world is so different that someone described it as the Upside-Down Kingdom. It's almost as if everything the world values, God doesn't care about. And much that the world thinks is without value, God prizes.

For example, what is important in the Kingdom of God. Right at the time of Jesus' birth, God sends out a clear message about **importance** in an upside-down way. To whom is the birth of Jesus announced? To the king? To the Prime Minister? To the Jerusalem Post?

None of these have the foggiest idea of what's happening. Instead, he announces the birth of God to shepherds out in the fields washing their socks by night. Now we have sentimentalised much of this story. We describe the shepherds as really nice folk. Sturdy country types. The kind of people we find on McLeod's daughters. Wholesome sheep farmers. Animal lovers. Family types. G-rated.

This is sentimental and dangerous. I wonder if this is the work of the Devil. The Devil wants to seduce us. He wants us to think about the birth of Jesus in the world's categories. He wants us to miss the point.

In that culture at that time shepherds were part of the lower classes. And you can be sure that

anyone who looked after sheep at night was merely a hired hand. And probably the kind of person who couldn't get better work. Perhaps they had criminal records. God turns the idea of importance upside-down. And for anyone who lives by the world's rules, it is, to say the least, very confusing and hard to understand.

But the incident I really like, happens a few days later when Jesus is brought to the temple for a Jewish ceremony a bit like our ceremony of child baptism. Have a look in Luke 2:25. Who is there to meet him? Is the archbishop present? No. Has the church choir been practising a special anthem? No. Do the vestry members line up to shake Mary and Joseph's hand as they come in the door? No sign of a vestry member at all.

First, Jesus is welcomed by Simeon. His only claim to fame is that he is "righteous and devout." And then in verse 36 we meet the second person who welcomes Jesus. Her name is Anna. Anna is 84 years old and has been a widow nearly all her adult life. Her claim to fame is that "she never left the temple—she worshipped there night and day."

Think about this for a minute. This turns on its head, the world's way of thinking about importance. It's the upside-down kingdom again. I mean, if Jesus came back today he'd probably walk up to 90 year old Iris Harris while all us Vestry members would be over on the side saying, "Hello, Important people over here!"

God loves and values people who develop a relationship with him. In his kingdom, relationship is the central idea. It is the idea about which Jesus is most passionate. And that's what we read about in the Gospel today. Relationship is the idea that should govern my living.

From the world's point of view it's as if God is saying "It's more important to be in relationship, than to be important."

When was the last time you saw someone on the 6 o'clock news being famous for being righteous and devout? *Here are the headlines, "Boronia church-goer celebrates 60 years of regular bible study and prayer. God says, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Sports news next.'*

Today's Gospel tells us that in God's economy, relationship with him is the thing that creates value. Relationships, not dollars, are the currency of God's economy.

How is this different from the world?

There is an important incident that illustrates how different God thinks about things compared to the way the world thinks.

Jesus and his disciples are walking through a grain field on the Sabbath. They are hungry, so a couple of them pick off the heads of some of the grain and eat it. Now there is a rule in Jewish law that says you can't harvest on the Sabbath because it's a day of rest. Picking the grain is, according to the law, harvesting. There's no doubt that the disciples were breaking the law. But Jesus has a completely different approach. A revolutionary approach. He thinks

that meeting people's needs is more important than the rules. It is more right to be loving, than to be right.

Jesus wants us to understand that the Kingdom of God is based on relationships that express love, while the Kingdom of the world is based on breaking these relationships. Breaking the relationships down to their individual bits—you, me, them.

This is one of the great lies the devil and his media henchmen tell us—the great lie that we are individuals.

After the murder of President Ceaucescu in Romania, western aid agencies were allowed to enter the country for the first time in decades. We found hundreds of so-called orphanages. I say “so-called orphanages” because mostly the children in these institutions weren't orphans.

They were children who had been given up by parents. The State brainwashed parents. These Mums and Dads thought the best hope for their children was to allow them to be raised by the State. This dreadful Orwellian lie was made worse, by the fact that children in such institutions received no care whatsoever. I don't mean they didn't get schooling. They got no care. They were not washed. They were rarely fed. The sick ones were left to die. They were never hugged.

Only the Devil really knows why the Romanian government did this. But they did. It was a form of child killing like Herod killing off all the under-3s in Bethlehem to try to get rid of Jesus. Through mass media lies, thousands of Romanian children were taken away for a better life. But the better life was really a death sentence.

Now, the truly amazing thing about this is that so many refused to die. When we entered Orphanage 1 in Bucharest we found some children who had survived ten years of almost complete neglect. And what were these children like? Well, they were like babies. At ten years of age they had no social skills. They had no language. They had no toilet training.

When we first met them we thought they were mentally retarded. We thought these institutions had been set up for the mentally ill. But the truth was worse. These were normal kids who had been deprived of social contact. The result was severely retarded kids. Deprived of relationship, the children became morons.

What is the message here? We are not individuals, friends. No man is an island. No woman either. God made us for relationship. He built us to be in community. He wants us to have a relationship with Him, and with one another. That's what it means to be human.

But this is not what the world says. The media serves up this daily deluge of me-me-me.

We live in a world which divides people into them and us, anglo and wog, citizen and refugee, winners and losers, rich and poor, young and old. While God says, “GAL 3:28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Notice that he does not say “Red and Yellow, Black and White, all are precious in my sight.” In the Kingdom of God, these categories are “no

longer.” They DO NOT EXIST. You see, God doesn’t divide people up at all. It’s not a matter of saying “I should be nicer to Asians.” God says “What’s an Asian?” In God’s Kingdom these categories do not exist. If we are in relationship with God, how can we be putting people into boxes?

The world is about division, about separating one from another, about power and violence. In the world, we are bombarded with the great lie that peace comes through violence. The myth-making structures of our world are primarily serving up this idea. Just look at television. On every channel, even the ABC, there is an almost constant diet of conflict and violence. Even the comedy is largely based on conflict. We are so tuned into the world’s way of win-lose that we can laugh when Raymond, whom everybody loves, is once again made to look like an idiot.

If you turn away from television and listen to radio, you’ll get an hourly serve of conflict and violence in the news—with updates on the half-hour too. This person is fighting with that person, this one is bitterly angry about something. Even on a station like “Light-FM” which is playing uplifting music from the Paul Colman Trio and Hillsong, not to mention life-affirming advertisements for Pam and Peter Beever at Ringwood Jewellers. Even this Christian radio station promoting Christian values carries 5 minutes of news every hour to remind us what the world’s values *really* are. I wonder if Light-FM have yet thought what this is saying to their audience?

Friends, we are deluged in a drowning flood of value-drenched information and entertainment. And the values that soak into our souls are not the values of the Kingdom of God, but the values of the one who rules the Kingdom of the World. The Devil is at work. And he’s busy. He’s busy messing with our minds every minute of the day.

This divided-up world also believes the myth that the way to peace is through violence. That’s why most of our entertainment media is about violence. Television, films, much of our music, most of our video games. About violence to make us believe it is normal and right. Like Romanian parents sending their children to death or lunacy, we’ve come to believe that violence leads us to peace.

Despite the obvious evidence of history, we still wage war to make peace. We pacify nations with bombs. We seek out scapegoats. We murder them, and then experience a temporary peace. Because it feels good for a little while we think it works. But it does not work for long.

What is peace in the Kingdom of God, though? It’s peace that

comes through relationship with God, and relationship with each other. It is the peace that we read about in Acts 2 in our life groups where the early church, living out its commitment to live in relationship, were so concerned for one another that they met and shared their possessions in daily fellowship. Anyone in need was supported by the others. It's the peace that can offer the other cheek when an enemy hits you. It's the peace that uses a kind word to turn away wrath.

It's not like the peace of the world. The peace of gossip and blame and revenge. The temporary peace. The peace that is merely an absence of war.

God's peace is an assertive peace, a pro-active peace, a peace that actively seeks out ways to make life better for others. It is a peace focussed on creating harmonious relationships, on creating relationships that build people up.

I worked in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. I saw plenty of places where peace was imposed by force. It doesn't work.

And yet, in a little village near Sarajevo in Bosnia, I met Muslims and Serbs who decided to get off the spiral of violence. They'd all lost loved ones in the earlier fighting. Husbands, sons, cousins. Everyone in this community had a tragic story of personal loss. Even the local orthodox priest and the Muslim imam. Yet these two men met. The Muslim and Christian leaders. It was dangerous to meet. They met in secret.

In the dark of night, with help from a World Vision worker from outside the village, they met in a private room and began to tell their stories to each other.

The two men were very wary. At first, they were accusing. They unloaded a lot of pain and anger. One could hardly blame them.

But after two or three meetings, a mutual respect had begun to grow. And after a few months they embraced, and they committed themselves to try to put the past away. And to begin to write a new history. A new history that expressed the desire for love and community. A desire to live in relationship.

I visited that village a year after this had begun. You know, I couldn't tell who was a Muslim and who was a Christian. And although the local people probably could tell, I could see that they didn't care. It was an unimportant category. It was a category of history. These categories were "no longer."

The future of these people lay in their common desire to create a new community. Their hope was in their relationship.

They were building a single school where before there had been two. They were rebuilding each other's houses. Actually, the look of a house is one way you CAN tell the difference between Muslim and Serb in Bosnia. But it was a difference that mattered no longer. In that community there was no longer Muslim and Serb.

Will that village survive? Maybe it will, maybe it won't. Because the power of the world to divide and destroy is enormous. But one thing I do know. That village looked like it had glimpsed what it meant to live in the Kingdom of God, even while they were surrounded by the Kingdom of the world.

And my prayer for them was the prayer of Jesus in today's reading, JOH 17:15 I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one.

What was the in mind of Jesus as he prayed? What does it mean to live in relationship? Well, the Apostle Paul explains when he was writing to the Christians in Corinth. We repeat his words almost every week in the Eucharist.

1CO 11:23 For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."

What exactly is it that we are to "do in remembrance" of Jesus? Are we merely to perform this ritual with crackers and tawny port? Or does the ritual have a meaning beyond that?

What did Jesus do when he broke the bread? Did he then proceed to eat the whole loaf himself while everyone watched? Hungrily?

What did Jesus do when he took the cup? Did he empty the whole bottle of wine himself? Was he trying to show how well he could hold his liquor?

No, when Jesus broke the bread, what did he do? He gave it away.

And when Jesus took the cup, what did he do? He gave it away.

It is this act of self-donation that gives the crackers and tawny port so much significance. It is this idea of self-giving love that turns mere ritual into sacrament.

Jesus says, "Here. I give myself away to you in love and relationship. Go thou and do likewise."

In a moment we shall share in the sacrament of Holy Communion. If we are serious about this, we'll participate because we don't belong to the world, in the same way that Jesus doesn't belong to the world.

We'll pray, not that we be taken out of the world, but that we be protected from Satan and his many subtle seductions. His seductions to compromise with the Kingdom of the world.

We'll pray that we'll be one in relationship with God, and one in relationship with one another, so that the world shall know the one who gives us the power to live in loving relationship:

God, the Father, Creator of the Universe, Lover of His creation, Friend in relationship with you and me.

A-men.