

Jeremiah 1: 4-10
Psalm 71: 1-6
Hebrews 12: 18-29
St. Luke 13: 10-17

Pentecost 11 2022

“Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.”

Hebrews 12: 28a

In February 1989, I was studying alone in a small library on a Friday evening, in the seminary (or theological college) where I was living. The double entrance doors began to rattle in their latches. I assumed that one of my friends was playing a prank on me... Then I noticed that the chandeliers – the ornate overhead lights – were shaking, and I thought, “How did one of my friends, pulling a prank, manage to shake the chandeliers?...” Then I noticed that a portable blackboard was shaking in its frame – and it became really weird!...

I left the library to the front reception area, where there was always someone stationed, 24 hours a day, every day of the year – and no one was there!... They had vanished! It appeared that there was no one else in downtown Toronto – just... me!...

It turned out there had been a minor earthquake in eastern Ontario, and by some mystery, the building I was in was affected. The person who had been stationed at the front desk had felt the earthquake, and had left his post to look for help...

Today’s second reading is from Hebrews 12. The unknown author of Hebrews contrasts the kingdoms of *this* world (which can be shaken and disturbed) with the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus (which is steadfast, and will never be removed)...

Being in an earthquake certainly got my attention!... We readers are reminded of when Moses went up the mountain, and there were great wonders... The people of Israel on the bottom of the mountain were filled with fear. God sometimes uses the natural world to get our attention: We are led to praise and to worship by the beauty and power of the world around us. We learn to think less about our own status, and to appreciate more the glory and the wonder of the Lord...

Let’s think more – not about the kingdoms of this world, but the kingdom of God...

What is this kingdom of God inaugurated -- brought about -- by the person and work of the Lord Jesus?... We often think of the kingdom of heaven as a state we get to in the future: First we are on earth. Then – perhaps, some people of faith assume – *after* we die, *then* we’re in the kingdom of heaven... People often think that the division of heaven and earth is before and after our deaths... But that’s not quite how Christian leaders explain the coming of the kingdom of God...

The Jewish people expected that when the Messiah would come, there would be a new age, and there would be a political transformation – a new period of liberty and freedom from oppression...

Scripture and tradition need to be understood a little more carefully: The Lord Jesus' first sermons were that the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, is not some distant event in the *future*, but is coming *among us*, as we enter into relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Mark 1: 15:

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel.'

When Jesus was being challenged by some Pharisees, the Lord Jesus emphasized that the kingdom of God is in our midst... We shouldn't get too caught up with looking at all the world's troubles... Luke 17:

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; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

So, we see that from the perspective of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God is not some far-off, *future* event, but something is happening around us *now*; something is happening in the midst of the community *now*...

As we are learning to live for God, we are kind of a mix of God's new creation (by his Holy Spirit), while also still dealing with human sin and foibles in this life... One glorious Day, all the sin which clings so closely will be decisively gone, and we will be perfectly in God's love for ever. As we have been baptized, as we are learning to live by faith, as we belong to the Christian community, something new has already begun. Paul writes, "If anyone is in Christ, he or she is a new creation..."

So, we are presently a mix of old habits and the natural world, but God has begun a *new* work, within us and among us. One amazing, glorious Day, all sin will be left behind, and we will be fully in the embrace of God forever...

God's reign and rule are not only for the future. We are beginning to experience our new life in Jesus Christ here, now... The kingdom of God is among us...

What does the kingdom of God look like?... Let's talk first about individuals, and then the community of the Church...

How do we recognize when someone is overflowing with the presence and goodness of God?... We can look to the depth of their love for God and for others, and the peace which a person of faith can carry, even in the midst of terrible adversities. We can think of the fruit of the Spirit from Galatians 5: “Love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, kindness, gentleness, self-control and goodness.” These are all powerful signs of the presence of God in someone’s life...

But like any kingdom, the kingdom of heaven is not between one individual and God! We are called to belong together; collectively, we are learning to love; and to heal the broken; and to help one another become all that we are called to be through Jesus Christ...

I find it helpful to think about the kingdom of God as a territory which is beautiful for God...For example, when we prepare people for baptism, the ancient baptism vows are that we are to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil – that is, we are choosing to leave behind what is spiritually evil; our own temptations; and the values of the world when people are in rebellion against God...

When I speak to a couple who are getting married, or when we are preparing for baptism, I often say something like this: “We have limited influence on how people live with day by day behave. We can be working and living among liars and cheats, or with people who are greedy or materialistic...

“But we can make a decision in our households: When we step over the thresholds, those worldly priorities don’t have claim on us any more. In this home, I will choose to cherish my wife or my husband – not to pretend that he or she is perfect, but to encourage him or her, to build up, to help my spouse become increasingly the man or woman whom the Spirit of Jesus wants us to be... If we have children, we want to teach different values than what is on TV, or in the neighbourhood. We want our children to learn to love passionately and deeply – to love God and others. We want our children to grow up to be spiritually discerning, and to learn to leave behind values of the fallen world, which is in rebellion against God... In this home, in this family, we are choosing something different...”

Just as we can choose our households to have different priorities, the parish community is meant to be a model for Christ’s priorities, and parish after parish, worldwide, is part of the organism of the whole, universal Church of God...

Sometimes the Church has failed. One of the old Anglican Articles acknowledges that sometimes in our common life, we have failed to uphold the gospel. We are then called to repentance and renewal. For example, all the implications of residential schools in Canada, of which churches (including the Anglican Church of Canada) played an important part, is now seen to be a deeply troubling failure to carry out the principles of

the gospel in our midst – not only in the physical and sexual abuse, not only inadequate resources and malnutrition, but the practices of taking children from their families, to deprive them of their common languages, and to raise them mostly or wholly without the influence of models of their mothers and their fathers... It was an astonishing failure, and the Church was complicit... We are called to do better, and to hold one another up to the standards of the gospel of Jesus Christ...

So, one way which many of us find helpful to think about the kingdom of God is to think of it as territory which needs to be claimed... In this country, Christians are often hesitant to affirm that we carry the Spirit of Christ in us, and each one of us is called to work to extend God's kingdom – to work for justice and for truth and for peace and for reconciliation...

If a place is hounded with terrible memories or fears, we can pray firmly, "Evil has no place here. By the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we claim this place as a place where God's love and goodness dwells." There is no need for drama, and Christians are meant to be ruled by peace, not fear. Let's live out our faith... We are called to *extend* the kingdom of God...

We are to be in awe of God, and to worship him alone, in Spirit and in truth... His kingdom is near, and our hearts and lives are to be filled with the Spirit of Jesus Christ. To him belongs all honour and glory: One God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; world without end. Amen...