

Recently I inherited several boxes of long-playing records (a bit like a large CD for those of you who are too young to remember them). It is an odd collection that have belonged to my cousin who did not want to take them with her when she moved into supported accommodation. I decided I would play each record before deciding what to do with it. There have been some interesting finds, including some music I have would never have listened to, but am enjoying exploring.

Amongst her eclectic collection was a cast recording of the first West End production of Godspell. I remember vaguely when I was a child that the adults were arguing about the story of Godspell as they felt it was making fun of Christianity. Then in my early 20's I saw an amateur production of it by a church theatrical society.

It is an interesting script, set to quite catchy tunes, based loosely on stories from Matthew's Gospel. I have quite liked many of the songs from Godspell for a long time, but haven't owned a recording for many years, and so it has been interesting to listen to it again.

The first thing that struck me was how much sound and production quality has changed since the 70's! The second thing was just how clever the writers were in capturing not only in words but in musical tone the irony and challenge of Jesus message. Jesus message was not comfortable in the first century, and for many, including many who would call themselves Christians, it is not very comfortable now.

As I was reading the Gospel reading for today I could hear parts of the soundtrack running through my head – hypocrites – fools – don't you understand that you can read the signs about things that are good for you, but when it comes to God's message you are slow on the uptake. I haven't come to make this better in a way that makes you comfortable, I have come to transform the whole world!

The challenge is that such a message does not bring much hope for many, it appears on first glance to bring division. Not unlike our reading today. But like all of Jesus teaching we need to read it in context of his whole ministry.

Jesus came to transform the world. We know this. We also know that the world – that is most of humanity - did not want to be transformed. Transformation costs! It means giving up what we know. It means letting go of power and the status quo which makes us comfortable. And Jesus wasn't just talking to the rich and the powerful. Even those who were slaves or in service felt safe in the routine and status they knew - to be free can be a fearful thing!

Jesus says to the crowd – look you read the signs when it comes to the seasons – you know when to plant your crops; but yet you do not look for what God is teaching through signs. In our context Jesus might say to us – you know how to watch the markets, when to invest, when to buy a house or sell; when to get the best outcome

for your business – and yet in faith you do not use the same knowledge, the same skills. You expect it to be done for you!

What Jesus questions at one level our integrity- we are so eager to listen to false prophets who give us easy answers; so willing to use our brain and skills when it comes to business or our families –but when it comes to faith or justice – all our skills – all our expertise – all our commitment to hard work seems to go out the window!

There is no getting around it – it is a confronting message.

The gift however, as one commentator put it this week, is that as interesting as the historical context and background of the biblical text may be, the more pressing question is not the past of the text but its future. What, that is, might this text say to us about our life in faith and in the world? How will this passage shape our view of God, ourselves, and our neighbour? How will this passage affect us? What will it do to us?

The kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed represents a new order governed not by might but by forgiveness, not by injustice but by justice, not by fear but by courage, and not by power but by humility. In 2 millennia this has not changed! We are still called to be part of this Kingdom.

But how do we do this? At one level to be faithful in our context is not hard. Our lives are not at risk by coming to church or by praying. While some might laugh at us, there is really little oppression. What we do encounter is apathy – church and worship are add-ons to our busy lives. If I had a pound for every person who told me that when they were less busy, or less important, or less committed to their family or work or hobby – they would come to church more – we would be able to build a basilica on this site and feed every hungry and homeless person in London!

So what do we do? How do we show that God is near? How do we bring peace? How do we bring justice?

Simply nothing and everything!

All that God asks is that we live faithful lives. That we honour that God is near.

Live not by might but by forgiveness, not by fear but by courage, and not by power but by humility.

Live with our heart and our minds focused solidly on Christ each day.

If each person in the world did this – no violence would exist – no conflict would dominate. We cannot change others – but we can change ourselves. And by the witness of our lives, others may seek to also be transformed.

Let me be clear – this does not mean we ignore in anyway the political situations that confront us – we must pray, we must change, we must act. But all of this action must be focused on the love of Christ which comes from the centre of our being.

Now, the temptation of course is for us as individual and a community to feel guilty that we do not have enough faith or are not transforming the world enough. But this is not about guilt, it is about us considering what would make a difference for us.

On Wednesday I had lunch with a colleague, and we were talking about the different approaches that groups and individuals take to changes in our climate and the need for us to care for our environment. We were talking about what means truly justifies the end. This conversation came about as we reflected that for the most part it is the wealthy who call for changes rather than those who are struggling. If you are living with the reality of endless drought, and every day you have to struggle to find enough water to keep your animals and family just to stay alive, you are not worried about statements on climate change, or environmental edicts – and it's not that you don't care, or that you are not willing to change – but for that farmer or family they have no energy to worry about the big picture, they have to focus on finding water for that day. All energy is about just staying alive today.

Where is the vision of Jesus Kingdom within this, what signs are being read or ignored. The first of course is, as Jesus stated so long ago, it is so easy to blame the other, rather than take responsibility for our own actions. It is easier to blame farmers or miners or airports or drivers or the poor, than it is for us to change our own person habits of buying or travel or comfort.

What would help us enter more deeply into our faith in a way that would help shape the way we think about our work, or families, or money, or action¹...

We don't come to Church just because it is a spiritual obligation – we come because it is a place to come to be encouraged, equipped, and sent to make a difference to the world. And a place to return to when living like Jesus creates division. Because it will. But it will also create joy.

At the end of Godspell there is an interesting repetitive song as Jesus dies on the cross. The controversy of Godspell for many was that there is no resurrection, on the death of God. But in the finale there is a glimpse at the irony and challenge which is the message of Jesus, and is expressed in our reading from Luke today.

As Jesus dies, and the cast singing of this, the activists from the cast start to sing 'Long live God!', as the bystanders sing 'God is dead'. It is hard to hear they sing over the top of each other these two realities. Jesus is dead, and the hope of resurrection to come... then as this continues a word is spoken.

*Heart by heart
Now, maybe now
We start learning how
We can build
A beautiful city*

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/08/pentecost-13-c-pursuing-a-faith-that-matters/>

*Yes, we can
Not a city of angels
But we can
Build a city of humanity²*

It is a great vision. It is the vision that Jesus draws us to. But it requires us to change ourselves. To read the signs, and to be the people God created us to be. Amen

² Exert Finale GODspell Lyrics