

# Sermon at Evensong on the 8th Sunday after Trinity, 30 July 2023

## Seeing God in the Ordinary and not just the Extraordinary

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*1 Kings 6:11-14,23-38, Acts 12:1-17*

Many today look for the extraordinary to see if God is at work. And if they cannot see the extraordinary then they think God is absent or far away. If they cannot see healings every week or miraculous prison escapes [Acts 12:1-17] or multiple rescues from danger, then they cannot believe.

But by looking for the extraordinary we miss what God is continually doing in the ordinary. The root cause of most unbelief is an unwillingness to see the miraculous in the ordinary. It is wise to ponder the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson: "The invariable mark of wisdom is to see the miraculous in the common."

By looking for the extraordinary we miss what God is doing quietly and unannounced. God is to be found in the quiet, in quiet joy, kindness and goodness.

The world generally is not a quiet place. And the continuous stream of activity and news in the world can be relentless. When we listen to the news, we can easily feel overwhelmed, nothing seems to be peaceful or joyful. Indeed, people who work in the media seem to deliberately avoid what is peaceful and joyful.

There was a family day parade in one of the cities of Serbia last month with thousands of mothers and their children celebrating motherhood and family life. It was the most beautiful thing I had seen for a long time. And I believe there were similar parades in other parts of Eastern Europe. But it had no coverage in our mainstream media.

God's presence and kingdom is often hidden from eyes that do not want to see. And anyway, God prefers to work quietly and in the background, and certainly he does not work forcefully to bring about the kingdom.

Every time somebody is compassionate and kind there is God's kingdom. Where there is justice, no matter how small, there is God's kingdom. Where there is true beauty, there is God's kingdom. Where there is wholesome joy there is God's kingdom. When I hear children playing in the playground to me there is God's kingdom. And when I hear birds singing joyfully in the morning, I am reminded of the joy of God's kingdom.

How do we see the world around us? Are our eyes open? Do we look in the right places and do we listen attentively to God speaking in the quiet? Yes, there is pain and suffering in the world, but can we not also see God's activity? And even in pain and suffering God is truly present.

In every generation and century Christ is present and renews hearts and lives.

If we do not believe that Christ renews hearts today, then we do not really believe in the resurrection and glorification of Christ.

Wherever we give or receive true love, kindness, compassion, generosity, we live and experience the Kingdom of Christ.

In the cultural climate of the West where there is much depression and anxiety - we might think that the Kingdom is far away. But even in the gloomy spiritual atmosphere of the West there are rays of light to be seen.

There are young people still seeking a vocation, and there are Churches that are flourishing and making new disciples. And this is even more true if we look at Africa, and some of the Asia Pacific nations, and South America.

In many parts of the world there are beautiful rays of light to be seen. And just a week ago I had a delightful Christian conversation with a young lady from Colombia who was visiting this cathedral - her heart was full of the love and light of Christ - to me she was a messenger from God - an angel.

The Kingdom of God is not seen in great signs and wonders but in the quiet and continual transformation of the heart.

The greatest sign of the kingdom is the person of Jesus himself who at the beginning of his public ministry announced the arrival of the kingdom. And the greatest sign of God's kingdom in the 21st century is ordinary Christians living their lives faithfully for Christ and radiating the fruit of the spirit - of love, peace, and joy.

The kingdom of God is like a small seed that will grow into a huge tree, and it is present today and fills us with hope: the kingdom of God is among us now. If only we would open our eyes to see.

In our secular culture where the Kingdom of God seems far away - let us ask for the grace to be sensitive to the presence of God's kingdom in our midst. Let us be sensitive to the presence of God's kingdom within us and within all of God's people. We can all partake of this Kingdom by letting Jesus transform us inwardly and by living as Jesus taught us.

Are we surprised sometimes by God's work and presence in those around us and his presence in our own lives? As we look back on our life, have we been aware of how God has worked in us. And how he has moulded us inwardly.

We often look to the extraordinary for reassurance that God is present. Yet God is more often found in the quiet, in quiet moments of grace, in quiet joy, kindness and goodness. The kingdom of God is quiet, peaceful, and unobtrusive. God does not want to dominate us and control us against our will. That is the last thing God wants to do.

One way to understand the presence of God's kingdom is as a domination-free society in which people are liberated to become what God means them to be.

People wrongly imagine that the most free and best society is a secular society, where people are free to do whatever they want, whenever they want and wherever they want. Basically, to follow their own self-will as long as it doesn't harm anyone else. But are we the best judges of what does not harm us or harm others? This kind of freedom is not true freedom. Following our own self will is not true freedom.

One well known book by C S Lewis is called - The Screwtape Letters. The book is a correspondence between two adversaries of God - Screwtape and his nephew Wormwood. Wormwood is a novice demon in charge of securing the damnation of a young man who has just become a Christian.

And in one place in the book, Screwtape writes:

“When God talks of their losing their selves, He means only abandoning the clamour of self-will; once they have done that, He really gives them back all their personality, and boasts (I am afraid, sincerely) that when they are wholly His they will be more themselves than ever.”

This is so true – we are only truly ourselves and totally free when we know the perfect freedom of following Christ. True freedom is not choice or lack of constraint, but being what we are meant to be - true freedom is being conformed to the image of Christ in our life. And the more conformed we are to the image of Christ the more peace, joy and freedom we will know - and as his beloved children hasten the coming of his kingdom.

Amen