

very well, and the intrusive editing of our imagination and inner lives is one of the basic mechanisms that sustain consumer capitalism. The question is, can we take control of our imagination and of the stories that steer us? Can we curate our inner lives so that they help us live forward, into the Kingdom of God, rather than wrapping us up in illusion and fear, which keep us prisoners of the past?

So as to shape these stories, I suggest that each of us has a responsibility to care for our sacred imagination. There are many ways we can do this.

First, I suggest that regular engagement with art is important in developing the imagination's musculature. I believe that everyone benefits from doing some kind of creative work, in which one midwives the birth of a new thing into reality – whether it be a painting, a garden or a cake.

Then, we can also curate our sacred imagination by frequently immersing our minds in Scripture. The Bible offers a whole imaginative world configured by God's character and work. Simply spending time immersed in that world acts to configure our imagination towards God's Kingdom.

Third, perhaps the most powerful way that our imagination is reshaped is through worship. But about this I will not speak today, because I am trespassing into my theme for tomorrow, which is how our collective religious practice enables us to respond to the coming Kingdom of God.

For now, let me end by inviting you to take stock, this Holy Week, of two questions: First, does your life look like you believe the Kingdom of God is a viable possibility, let alone a coming certainty? In your relationships – your use of time – what you do with money – how you treat your own body – is your life an outpost of the glorious Kingdom that is to come?

Second, how strong is your religious imagination? How much care do you take to notice the Kingdom as it comes into being all around you? And how much time do you spend immersed in an imaginative world which has God as its main actor?



HOLY WEEK IN THE TIME OF CRISIS—

Tuesday: Being Crucified

Yesterday I suggested that we understand the Cross and Resurrection as being about the Kingdom of God. In Jesus, God show us that self-giving love creates all, holds all in being, and is sovereign. Sin is rebellion against God's love; and in announcing that the Kingdom of God is at hand, Jesus announces that the rebellion is drawing to a close.

On this understanding, Cross and Resurrection are a declaration of Kingdom truth, and also a decisive act. By means of the Cross, God destroyed the bondage which holds us and all creation in an alienated and defeated place. Moreover, Cross and Resurrection specifically show the character of the Kingdom, what it's like. It is not like human kingdoms, a place of domination, chiefly of benefit to the strong, or to insiders. On the Cross, God sides with the poor, the humiliated, the excluded. This is God's choice; God's kingdom is upside down compared to the world we humans make.

This understanding of Holy Week and Easter presents Atonement as an organic whole with Jesus' ministry and teaching throughout the four Gospels. Because the Kingdom is here and now, it means that the Cross and Resurrection are also about here and now - not about some imaginary elsewhere called heaven, but about here, where we live. And because the Kingdom comes by overturning the kingdoms of the world, it means that Holy Week and Easter trigger and demand a transformation of people and communities. That is why they inspire hope.

My themes today and tomorrow will be the nature of that transformation. Tomorrow, I shall speak about what it means for our religious practice and for the church. Today, however, I shall speak about myself and yourself – what Cross and Resurrection mean for us as individuals in our walk with God.

My title today is "Being Crucified," which is inspired by Paul's description of the Christian life when he wrote to the Galatians:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (*Galatians 2: 20*)

To be crucified with Christ is to take the meaning of the Cross as our meaning; Christ's choice of the Cross as our choice. The Cross is a definitive declaration that God is on the side of the outcast and poor, and that self-giving love is the only legitimate sovereignty. We are invited to make the same declaration in our own lives.

The Cross and Resurrection therefore call us to change our lives, and to live in a particular way. We are faced with a new reality, and an invitation to adapt to this new reality. The invitation comes with an incentive, because life will be better if we do adapt to reality. And it comes with a warning, that things will go badly for those who do not. There is no way we can opt out of the change – it is coming whether we like it or not. But we are given a period of time within which to adapt.

This not a message about nice behaviour; in fact, it is not in the first instance about ethics or behaviour at all. It is about power, and change, and a coming state of reality.

What does it look like, to live and behave as a citizen of the Kingdom? Jesus teaches that God gives status and priority to the poor, hungry, sick, despised or excluded: the people human kingdoms treat as the scum of the earth. The hungry will be fed, the poor enriched, those who weep will laugh, the excluded will be given a seat of honour. Jesus taught all this, and showed it in His own actions. And then He ratified His teaching by the manner of His chosen death: in undergoing a slave's death, an outcast's death, humiliation and pain, He finally and definitively sided with the scum of the earth.

For the poor, this is wonderfully good news. The Kingdom is where they find acceptance, where they are fed and clothed and healed, where they are forgiven and re-integrated into God's people. This is God's kingdom, a wonderful, hopeful vision of justice, mercy and joy. And what about everyone else? What about the powerful and rich? Well, Mary's Magnificat also describes the Kingdom of God, when she sings that God scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts, puts down the mighty, sends the rich away with empty bellies. Or we could remember Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which speaks not only of blessing, but also of woe: woe to the rich, to those with full bellies, to those to whom the world is kind. I don't think Jesus is wishing those people ill. This is a prediction, not a wish. Hierarchies of riches and power are simply in the way. They must be swept away, so as to enable the triumph of mercy, love and justice.

All this is not complex or subtle or hard to understand. It's clear, simple; rather stark. Whether this looks like good news perhaps depends on whether you understand yourself to be one of the rich, or one of the poor; hungry, or full; a person comfortable in the world, or one who mourns because of the world's cruelty and sin.

Perhaps, if you find yourself on the wrong side of the divide, then this reads like bad news. But the other good news is that Jesus has told us how to put that right. That's what Jesus' ethical teaching is all about – all the cheek-turning and coat-sharing, unloading the camel so it can get through the needle, all the Good Samaritan and Prodigal Son... It's all about the wonderfully good news that God's kingdom is for anyone who is willing to live by its rules. Everyone now knows how to be accepted into it. If you find yourself on the wrong side of the line – and we all do, in one way or another - then... repent... change.

All this is immensely practical and here-and-now. It is not hard to understand how it applies where we live. The hierarchies of status and wealth in our society are not hidden, but are evident to the naked eye. In our local community, a moment's thought shows us who counts most, and who has a hard time; we know where the poor live, what their houses are like, and their lives; and the same for the rich. The evidence comes to hand for anyone who wants to make a serious appraisal, what does my life look like relative to the coming Kingdom? It's a series of practical questions: about our relationships (whom we seek out and prioritise, how we treat people); our money and assets; our use of time.

I will not unpack this discipleship challenge at length – partly because I do not have time – but mainly because for this you have the Gospels. If you are open to the challenge, then simply take Jesus' Kingdom teaching as being for you. If not... well, as Jesus says about the rich man in a parable, 'If they do not listen to [the Bible], they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead' (Luke 16: 31).

The message that we must adapt to Kingdom reality only really makes sense if we recognise that judgement is coming. We are given time to adapt to the Kingdom. But not any amount of time, and we do not know how much time. The coming judgement of God is an

immensely powerful biblical theme, and I do not think that Christianity makes any sense if one tries to narrate the faith without judgement.

Do not misunderstand me, I am saying nothing about pits of fire or boiling sulphur. Cartoonish imagery like this, which is both mythological and blasphemously horrible, makes it harder for us to think about judgement. The older and stronger tradition is that of the Old Testament prophets, which boils down to highlighting that actions have consequences; that God's reality is as it is; and that a determined and persistent ignoring of reality is not going to end well.

I will end with a word about timing. The Kingdom of God is, as people say, "already but not yet". The Kingdom was inaugurated on the Cross – and yet, the rebellion seems to continue; the world still spins out of control; cruelty and selfishness remain rampant. God has allowed to the world a space of time to come to terms with the new rules, and that time has not yet expired. This is one of the larger challenges facing a Christian – how might we live within this time-paradox of 'already but not yet'. I offer a couple of thoughts about this. First, that it was not different for Jesus. The gospels are full of teachings about how the Kingdom is close – pervasive like yeast, growing from shoot to rampant tree, appearing out of nowhere, surprising and challenging us – but is not yet universal. All these metaphors of growth are an acknowledgement of not-yet-ness, that the Kingdom is not all Is but is still partly Will be. That is how it is for us, and it's how it was for Jesus.

Jesus invites us to live in that situation by paying attention. Look, He says. Notice, and respond to what you see. This business of noticing is a vital life-skill, and one we can learn and cultivate. Looking back on a day, do we notice all the love and beauty, or just the blemishes, or the things not wholly managed? Paul advised the Philippians to cultivate attention: "... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things." (Phil. 4:8).

Second, I suggest that, in order that the future coming of God's Kingdom can gain substance in our minds – any colour, force or energy – then we need to build up our capacity to inhabit what does not yet exist. We need to cultivate sacred imagination.

I don't know if you have ever considered how your brain thinks about the future. I understand that psychologists who study such things see the mechanism by which we think about the future as essentially the same as that by which we remember the past. When we envision reality at a later point, we essentially create a memory. Future-memories use the same mental capacities stuff as past-memories – and they seem to be made of the same stuff, being episodic and fragmentary.

This is not a mechanical process like the operation of a CCTV camera. It is open to being guided and shaped, in various ways. What episodic memories we lay down depends on what we pay attention to, and this is just as true of remembering now for use in the future, as it is of thinking about the future for use in the present.

Then, as a separate process, we then use these memories to construct stories. Stories about the past (for instance about who we are, who other people are, the way the world works), or stories about the future. This story-making process is also not automatic, but is influenced by many things – for instance, by what other stories we accept as true, and what other people seem to be thinking. Control of these stories is, in fact, one of the basic means by which people are steered and controlled. Marketing departments understand this³