**Island Bay Presbyterian Church, Wellington, New Zealand**

**Sermon Lent 2 – Gateway 2: Commitment**

**Romans 12:1-8**

12:1 “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.”

 ***Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice …***

As I have mentioned here before, when I was a teenager I became really fascinated by the Bible and by the things Jesus had to say, and I would go through and read them quite a bit. And a phrase that kept coming up was this thing “**the Kingdom of God**.”

Jesus was always talking about the Kingdom of God - the Kingdom of God is like yeast; the Kingdom of God is like a woman who loses a coin; the Kingdom of God is like a farmer sowing seed etc…

“What on earth is this Kingdom of God thing???”, I thought, and no-one I asked could give me an answer that I understood.

Until I got to university, that is, began studying theology, and asked one of my lecturers. “It’s simple” he said, “look at the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. And the line in it that says “your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.’ That basically sums it up.”

For this teaches us that the Kingdom of God exists where God’s will is done. *Simple, right?*

However, Jesus is also teaching us that God’s will is always done in the place we call heaven, but that that isn’t enough for God. God wants his will done on earth too, as in heaven.

So in this prayer Jesus was teaching his disciples to offer themselves as a living sacrifice, and to work and to pray for God’s will to be done here in earth as well; so that God’s Kingdom might come here among us, as it is in heaven.

*And that bit’s not so simple…*

I found that explanation really clear, and it has guided me in my Christian walk ever since. God’s Kingdom exists wherever God’s will is done, and it is God’s will for us to offer our prayers, attitudes and actions as a living sacrifice to God, so that the Kingdom might break forth in us and around us.

The next verse of our Romans reading…

 12:2 “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Do not ***conform***, but rather be ***transformed***…

Jesus wants our thinking to be transformed by grace and not just conformed to the way everyone else thinks. Jesus wants those who follow him to be different, to be the people God truly made them to be!

And one gift he gave us to help effect that transformation was the example of his words and his lifestyle: the things he said and the people he partied with.

Accordingly, he opened his table to both sinners and saints, he went to the houses of hated tax collectors, and he touched those whom society regarded as unclean.

But he also taught about the Kingdom: that in the Kingdom we love our enemies and bless those who curse us; that in the Kingdom we give to those who ask, that we do not cling on to our possessions or be anxious about the future, and that in the Kingdom we have to lose our life in order to gain it.

A living sacrifice…

These were hard teachings that Jesus brought, *and they were especially hard for those who had stuff* – those who had money and status and power, and who were anxious about losing it. It was much easier for those who had little to hear Jesus, and to understand his words as being good news.

For God’s Kingdom is an upside down Kingdom, it does not work how we think it should work… And so we have to trust, we have to step out in faith in order to be part of this Kingdom; we have to act in ways that may not come naturally.

And so over Lent we are doing a series of sermons on gateways to the Kingdom, truths and attitudes God calls us to adopt but which may be hard for us, which may initially be seen as obstacles.

However, the Bible calls on us to taste and see that the Lord is good! Jesus promised us that if we seek we will find! And so if we do step out and try to set our own wisdom aside and pass through these gates, we will receive the blessings of the Kingdom (blessings that may also include hardship and times of trial, such is the upside down nature of God’s Kingdom…)

Last week we did gate 1 which was **Revelation**:

This was the idea from Jesus words in John 6, *that we can only enter the Kingdom if God draws us*. We cannot buy our way in, think our way in, force our way in. We cannot get in on our own; God must reveal himself to us and draw us.

The beginning of the journey as a disciple of Jesus is revelation, God draws us. That’s gate 1.

However, God is actually revealing himself to people all the time, often in small ways. But people are too busy to pause, or don’t know what to do with these revelations – and so God also sends us out as salt and light, bearing the good news, helping people to see and embrace the love that surrounds them.

From Angela’s testimony earlier in the service today we heard a dramatic story of God’s revelation. How God encountered her in a dream while she was living in Iran, a country that is very closed to Christianity and where there are few opportunities to meet Christians.

Jesus literally came to her and revealed himself to her directly. But, Angela still needed *people* to explain her dream to her, and she needed to find a community where she could learn more about what this Jesus dream meant for her life.

God came to her in a powerful way, but God still used people – and I am imagining that it was a very brave thing for her friend to have told others that he was a Christian, so that she did know a person she could approach with her questions.

So that was gateway 1, revelation.

Gateway 2 ties in to this, and is the gate of **commitment**:

Commitment! A word that some of us are very comfortable with, but that gives others the jitters.

The theory is that this is one of the major stumbling blocks for Kiwis. It is said that more than 1/4 of Christians in this country don’t belong to a faith community.

However, I am worried that I am preaching to the converted here in **that *this is something I feel that IBPC is very strong at***. You lot are a highly committed bunch of people. It is a real honour to serve in this community and to be surrounded by such buy-in and support (and I’m sure that Bruce feels the same).

So today I want to *affirm* you in your commitment, and I want to *remind* you why we are called to commit as disciples, why commitment is a gateway the Kingdom of God.

Are you ready?

Romans 12 again, this time verses 3-5

“3. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5. so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

So, a re-mix of that…

“I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought… because in Christ, we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.”

***We are Christ’s Body, and we belong to each other.***

People these days struggle with that because we are individuals! We are unique and different, and we make our own identity! We don’t like calling ourselves names like Christians or church-goers because those angry-looking people on TV, and those weird American fundamentalists with all the guns call themselves those things, and we do not want to be associated with them!

(Do we?)

Also, religious institutions, even ones as boring and un-sexy as Presbyterians, have done oppressive and harmful things over history, things that we don’t want to be associated with – and rightly so! So it’s nicer to be labelled spiritual rather than religious, and it can be much more comfortable to opt out of religious institutions altogether.

And so, many Kiwi Christians have stepped out of faith communities and have chosen to go it alone. And to be clear, a faith community doesn’t have to meet on a Sunday in a church building; it’s just a gathering of people, centred on Christ, who meet together regularly and seek to encourage one another on the road of being a disciple of Jesus.

So, going it alone can be understandable, *but it is a misunderstanding* of how God’s Kingdom works. Sure, we can have bad church experiences and step out of it for a season. And sure, we can be called to seasons of solitary prayer as a hermit in a cave somewhere - as Jesus himself sought out times alone to pray… but fundamentally God’s Kingdom works in community.

Jesus taught us that wherever 2-3 are gathered together in his name he is there – a community gathered in prayer.

Paul tells us that we are the Body of Christ, each with our different giftings, complimenting one another and supporting each other – a community of diversity and service. And our faith also teaches us *that God is a community*.

Christianity teaches us that God is a Trinity, made up of three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – three persons coming together eternally in love for each other. Our faith teaches us that all of Creation was birthed out of God, out of a Community of love. We were born out of community and we were born for community; community is at the heart of existence, and community is at the heart of God’s will.

The Kingdom of God comes in community; this is how the Kingdom works!

There will always be exceptions of course, but this is the normative pattern for God’s will for us. Community!

And to be engaged in community takes **commitment**.

Seasons change and we may be called to a new place for a new season, but then we discern the right community for us to join for that season (again, regardless of its size or when and where it meets), and we commit - investing in their common life. For we complement each other; we belong to each other; we need each other… and the road of discipleship calls us to commit to each other. We aren’t called to commit to an institution or a building, but rather to a living body of people, the Body of Christ.

 I’ll conclude with our Romans 12 reading again…

12. Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. 2. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. 3. For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. 4. For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5. so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.