

Sermon for 2019 Yr C Proper 15
Preached Sunday 08/18/2019 at St. James', Mount Vernon
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Be not afraid, said the angel to Mary.

Fear not, said the angels to the shepherds.

Do not be afraid, said Jesus to his disciples.

Today's gospel is always startling and concerning, seeing how it speaks of stress and conflict. "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!"

Jesus is living under the stress, the burden of his own task, a mission that requires his complete commitment—to go up to Jerusalem and to his death.

Jesus is not a masochist, his purpose is not self-destruction. He comes on a rescue mission, for us, for the world. And his gift of himself, his obedience even unto death, calls us into his commitment to proclaim God's blessing, to heal the sick, liberate the captive, feed the poor, to bring justice for the oppressed. To bring the kingdom of God near.

Jesus gave his life on the cross for us, not so that things can remain the same, but so we can all belong to the kingdom of heaven, which becomes real and present when we are filled with Jesus' faith and act towards one another on the basis of that faith.

To live as a Christian commits us to change. Our faith in the promise of the Kingdom of God brings us into conflict with the powers of this world. It sets us against all the forces that diminish life, that prevent anyone from living lives of dignity, fulfillment, and love.

We live in a part of the world that is richly blessed, where even the poor among us enjoy luxuries unimagined by the poor centuries ago.

And yet, even our blessed land is filled with people who are discouraged and despairing, who struggle to get by, whose lives are ravaged by drugs and addictions, who don't share the same opportunities as the lucky few. And the troubles of God's children are even greater in other parts of the world, where people live without freedom, without economic opportunity, where violence threatens families and children go without education or medical care, and where clean air and water are in short supply.

Too many live in poverty, in fear of violence, in misery and hardship. This is not the kingdom of God... this is the world that needs to be saved.

Jesus brings hope and promise, by setting us in conflict with the world as it is and leading us all towards a world transformed by justice and mercy. We who follow

Jesus are witnesses and agents of change, proclaiming this Good News by the actions of our lives.

This gospel message is challenging to me. I am a card-carrying member of the comfortable class. And yet, through baptism I have been united with God's children everywhere, and especially with those who suffer. Although I do not live in the trenches with them, I too am called to stand up to the powers on their behalf, to resist injustice, and to lend my resources and energy towards the blessing of others. My faith requires me to think about how I can assist the weak and vulnerable, how I can advocate for the development of troubled economies, how I can support opportunities for meaningful work.

The way of this world is to focus on our own needs and gratification. Jesus commits us to another way, where our desire is to bring God's justice, mercy and blessing to all people.

As long as our eyes are on the gospel, as long as we long to live in the kingdom of God, we will be in conflict with those whose treasure is found in this world. But we need not be afraid, for this conflict is grounded in love for the world, in love for the people who live in it. It is a necessary conflict that comes with change.

Amen.