

40 Days of Fitness

A daily devotional by Rev Garry Hardingham

DAY 29 – The Church as Witnesses

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.’

Mark 1:14-15

Right from the beginning of His ministry, Jesus proclaimed the Gospel, the Good News, in terms of the Kingdom of God. What was clear is what Jesus was proclaiming was that in Him the Kingdom of God and thus, the rule of God, was being revealed to all people. And the people understood this. The people of Israel had always known that in the coming of the kingdom of God the boundaries of Israel would be extended to include all nations and all things. The coming of the Messiah would be the sign of the fulfilment of this hope.

So Jesus' coming was not only to restore Israel in relationship to God, this act of restoration would coincide with God's active salvation for all people. Therefore, when Jesus is baptised, he is proclaimed as the Son of God in an action which identifies himself with humanity's estrangement from God. For Jesus did not need to be baptised, but is baptised for the sake of humanity which had been alienated from God. His baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of all of humanities' sins. This was not just about Israel's sins, but all sin.

It's also out of this understanding of the Jesus' ministry in terms of the Kingdom of God that we need to understand Jesus' call of the twelve disciples. This action of Jesus in choosing the twelve aligns with the expectation of the Jews regarding the messianic age. In the messianic age, the twelve tribes of Israel would again be gathered from the four corners of the globe, gathered together by God's action. So the coming of the Kingdom and the gathering of His people are one and the same act of Jesus being emphasised as the Messiah and the heralding of a new covenant.

The role of the disciples (apostles) was therefore to proclaim what they witnessed in their time with Jesus as human beings restrained to being earthly beings. And this was why in Acts 1:21, when Matthias was called to replace Judas as one of the apostles it was important that they chose from some “*who have accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.*”

The disciples are witnesses to Christ's ministry. Sure, they perform miracles in His name, but not in their own. They themselves do not fulfil the mission of Christ, but bear witness to it. And the very moment when Jesus truly needs them in the dark hours before His arrest, we find the disciples asleep, hiding, or denying Him.

Why? Why is the abandonment of Jesus at that critical moment even mentioned? After all if you wanted to use the Biblical narrative to emphasise the central role of the disciples in the life of the emerging church, you might have chosen to leave out this act of abandonment; show the world how committed these disciples were to their leader. Instead Jesus is betrayed by one of His church. And there is a lash out of violence. But the abandonment of the disciples emphasises our understanding that the church plays no role in God's work of reconciliation. How might we have understood the central work of Jesus, if He had been crucified along with even a few of his disciples? We would have to conclude that their deaths were also part of God's work of reconciliation.

The story of the early disciples and their bewilderment and abandonment is the story of the church that was to emerge after the day of Pentecost. It was a church that was called to bear witness to Christ, not to act as Christ in His absence. And this is the church we belong to this day.

PRAYER

Gracious Jesus,
We say we would never leave You,
For You have promised never to leave or abandon us.
But Lord, we are slow to comprehend even that which we witness by our own eyes.
We recognise that the work of reconciliation is Your work alone,
and that we are called to witness this reconciliation to the world.
So help us to witness, even in the darkest times,
And strengthen us to show forth the forgiveness You have shown us.
In your precious name. Amen