

## .Proper 9 Year C 2019

“The kingdom of God has come near”

Business consultants tell us that straplines should do two things. They should communicate the essence of one’s brand and they should showcase what you can promise to your audience. From the very start of his public ministry Jesus’ strapline was “The kingdom of God has come near” and we heard it again at the end of today’s gospel. The difficulty for us is that most people no longer know what that strapline means because they don’t share the OT background from which it emerged. So to get to the essence and promise of Jesus’ strapline I want to quote a 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian who said: “The kingdom of God is creation healed”. And we see this being worked out in the parables of the kingdom that Jesus told and showcased in the miracles he performed.

For instance, Jesus told a parable in which a son became estranged from his father. And the parable centres on how the Father transformed this situation through his compassion and forgiveness so that the relationship was

healed. And whenever we see forgiveness in action and relationships being made new we see a reflection of God's Kingdom. We also find Jesus telling parables about a poor widow seeking justice and about debts being cancelled and we see him feeding the hungry with miraculous generosity. And when we see the oppressed set free and people being treated with mercy then we see signs that the kingdom of God has come near. In a different episode we hear of Jesus sailing on the Sea of Galilee and being caught in a violent storm. And when he rebukes the wind and the waves there is calm and peace; we see the natural world being healed and the kingdom of God revealed. The scope of God's kingdom is enormous – it embraces every element of the created world so that everything and everyone has the potential to be healed.

But, with the coming of the healing light of Jesus into the world there was also a shadow. Very early in his ministry Jesus had to come to terms with the hardness of heart with which his preaching of the kingdom was met. People in power, people gripped by a legalistic mind-set, people who were

insecure or envious were not going to be changed cheaply. In the end the only way Jesus could bring the kingdom within the reach of everyone was by allowing himself to be handed over to death by those who perceived the Kingdom of God to be a threat rather than a gift. And what followed was a revelation of the love of God so powerful that the Roman Centurion, who had overseen the crucifixion, had his mind turned round. He turned and recognised Jesus as the Son of God, as the one who brings the kingdom near.

And the turning round of our minds is central to the rite of baptism. In a few moments Sabrina will be asked “Do you turn to Christ?” Will you turn round and open yourself to the blessings of the kingdom of God? And when she has said those words, “I turn to Christ”, the sign of the cross will be made on her forehead to remind her that Jesus gave up his life so that we might receive eternal life. And as water is poured over her head, a metaphorical drowning, she shares in the death of Jesus so that she might also share his risen life. And finally Sabrina is given a candle as a sign that she has been

filled with the eternal light of Christ. But, all these blessings of the kingdom are given not for privilege but for service. Like the 70 Jesus sent out in our gospel reading Sabrina is called to shine as a light in the darkness of this world, to be God's agent, helping to heal relationships, to show mercy and make a difference for good to the whole of creation.

And Sabrina's baptism is important for each one of us this morning. As we witness her baptism we are called to consider our own vocation as baptised followers of Jesus. Are we communicating in word and deed the essence of that strapline "the kingdom of God has come near"? Do we, at the start of each new day, turn afresh to Christ so that we bring his healing presence in this or that situation; or are we hardening our hearts in some way to God's movement of forgiveness, mercy and peace? I hope we will pray for Sabrina as she is baptised this morning but let us also seek grace for ourselves that we may become part of Jesus' promise that "the Kingdom of God has come near".