

## **Trinity 8 sermon by Andrew 11 August 2019 Lamps lit and ready for action**

**Genesis 15: 1-6; Hebrews 11: 1-3,8-16; Luke 12:32-40**

Well, three very challenging readings this morning.

Abraham wants to know who his heir is going to be; but has to be satisfied with a vision and a promise. The writer to the Hebrews says that those patriarchs of old held on to that promise even though they never lived to see it in its fullness. And Jesus asks us to live as if we are ready to respond to his knock on the door at any moment.

Now this is challenging for the simple reason that most of our minds don't work that way. Lots of us want to know how things are going to turn out, what's going to happen tomorrow and the day after and the day after that. I'm like the kid in the back seat of the car: are we nearly there yet? I've never been one of those people who say it's better to travel than to arrive. I want a detailed itinerary and travel insurance to boot. And unlike Abraham, I, for one, am not ready to move at five minutes' notice.

But the challenge of our readings is to stop worrying about whether I've got comprehensive insurance for every conceivable eventuality and trust that my life and future are part of something much, much bigger, infinitely vaster – a covenanted kingdom in which I can begin to learn to let go of my need to play it safe. Fear not little flock, says Jesus.

So there's comfort here, yes, but the challenge is urgent. We're to be ready with lamps lit to welcome a Lord who comes in many forms – like a thief in the night – and who is easily missed if we're not looking.

But what does it mean to be awake with our lamps lit today? I think it means to celebrate every sign of the kingdom wherever we find it. If I was to look for some signs of the Kingdom here, looking back over the last few months, I'd highlight things like the group of children with special needs who've visited us twice now. At Christmas time they came on food bank day and a wee dog brought by one of our clients made a bee-line to join the baby Jesus in the manger, just as I was telling the kids about the ox, the ass, the sheep and suddenly – a wee terrier dog. Of such is the kingdom of God, says Jesus.

Then there was the Maundy Thursday service we shared here with our Baptist friends, with Thomas washing our hands and then reading psalm 22 whilst Mariusz and I stripped the altars. That wouldn't happen everywhere. That was special. And so was the Easter food blessing Mariusz and Anna organized – another sign of the kingdom. Barriers between churches broken down because Jesus prayed that we all might be one. I think of the Indian family birthday party here one night last week – when I got pulled in and served a wonderful Indian dinner, which means I now know some of my neighbours on the street. I think of the loving and caring that goes on here every week. The fact that we notice when someone's missing and someone picks up the phone to ask if they're ok. And I think of the Food Bank where the new person who hesitantly hovers at that door, wondering if it's ok to come in, is met with the kind of welcome

Jesus would want us to show. Remember, whenever you do this for the least of my brothers and sisters, you do it for me. This is all completely ordinary, but it's also the Kingdom that grows secretly and in small ways.

I even see signs of the kingdom in some funny moments, like a week ago when I took this candlestick outside and I had a can of spraypaint to repaint it. I was doing what the instructions said, standing just inside the hedge, shaking the can and it was rattling like they do, when a man on the other side of the hedge, who couldn't see me – a big, burly guy with a beard it turned out – challenged me: “hey are you doin' graffiti on that church?!” I quickly said: “It's ok, I'm the minister!”, but at least he cared enough to do something. No-one was going to deface our church with him around.

Years ago when I was a theological student I remember having to write an essay. “Is the Church the same as the Kingdom or is it its instrument and sign?” Well the answer to the first part of that is that the Church is not the Kingdom because the kingdom is uncontainable. And it breaks out all over the place, breaks in like a thief in the night, like an unexpected invitation to a party with neighbours, or a passer-by caring about a church, even if he's never been in it.

The challenge of these readings, then, is to loosen up our thinking about what it is to be Church. And it's almost like Jesus asks us to give ourselves a good shake. We might ask, like Abraham, who is going to come after us? Who will inherit all this? But the answer seems to be to act and think and to get ready almost as if the best possible future was already here, like you could see it if you stood on tiptoe. So we're too long for the Church to grow, and to expect that to happen – just like Abraham - almost as if it already has.

All human organisations have a tendency to settle down and get comfy – I personally have that tendency, I know I do; but we follow a Jesus who left his disciples just breathless trying to keep up with him. And all churches need to open themselves up to some of that breathless energy. Because this is a gospel with an edge. If the Lord burst in the back door one day how would we react? Would we shoosh him and hand him a hymnbook? Or would we all jump up and, once we'd got over the shock, ask him: OK, Lord, what now?

So “Is the Church the same as the Kingdom or is it its instrument and sign?” No we're not the Kingdom. That's much bigger than us; but we are its instrument and its sign. We've got a story to tell, we have the Cross and resurrection of Jesus to preach to a needy world, we have the love of the Risen Jesus to share, and we have the willingness to be ready to welcome him in whatever form he comes, with our lamps lit.