

URC YA14 Keynote 3

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The Kingdom of Heaven

It's been a long day. Mostly because the night was too short, but we've done loads today. We've been in workshops, small groups, created things through art, music, drama, crafts and words.

I hope that your head is full of thoughts and ideas and that those of you who were in the mental health workshop with Allan and I will never see raisins in the same way again.

Today has in lots of ways been a day of stories. We started the day in small groups telling stories about the most frightening thing that's happened to you. For me that was being thrown off a crane 120 feet up, but I lived to tell the tale.

Our stories matter. Who we are is often made up of the experiences of our experiences. The things that happen to us and the things we do.

One of my favourite stories in the Old Testament is the story of Jacob. Jacob is the younger twin of Esau. They are very different. Esau is a hunter and Jacob prefers to cook. When the time comes for their father to pass on his inheritance, Jacob pretends to be his older brother and fools his father into giving him the inheritance. It doesn't work out well and Jacob is forced to run away. Jacob meets God a couple of times. Once, in a dream, he sees a ladder stretching up to heaven. That vision changes his mind about who he is and what he should do. The second time he meets God is a bit more physical... We read the story in Genesis 32:

But Jacob stayed behind by himself, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he couldn't get the best of Jacob as they wrestled, he deliberately threw Jacob's hip out of joint.

²⁶ The man said, "Let me go; it's daybreak."

Jacob said, "I'm not letting you go 'til you bless me."

²⁷ The man said, "What's your name?"

He answered, "Jacob."

²⁸ The man said, "But no longer. Your name is no longer Jacob. From now on it's Israel (God-Wrestler); you've wrestled with God and you've come through."

²⁹ Jacob asked, "And what's your name?"

The man said, "Why do you want to know my name?" And then, right then and there, he blessed him.

³⁰ Jacob named the place Peniel (God's Face) because, he said, "I saw God face-to-face and lived to tell the story!"

³¹⁻³² The sun came up as he left Peniel, limping because of his hip.

Jacob was changed by his encounter with God. He left his struggles limping but knew that he had seen God face to face. Israel, the name given to the people of God in the Old Testament, is his name and it means to wrestle with God.

I wonder how many of us are prepared to meet God like that? To wrestle and never let go, even when it seems pointless or even painful?

The exiles we've been talking about, those people carried off to Babylon, could have given up... but exile is not always the darkest corner of the earth. Sometimes it is lush and plentiful, sometimes it is full of life...

So, the exiles didn't give up. They struggled with God

They had to work out a whole new idea of God. They had to consider that it was God who put them in exile in the first place. They had to consider that God might also be with them in exile in Babylon. They had to consider that God might also be the God of the Babylonians and that perhaps God didn't live in a box in a room in a Temple.

The Psalms, and Boney M, tell us that the people sat down and wept by the rivers of Babylon. Their question was how can they song a new song to the Lord in a strange land? What does the Kingdom of God look like when everything we know has been taken away?

I read a book by an American pastor called Brian McLaren. The book is called 'Everything Must Change' and it is McLaren's cry for the Kingdom of God here on earth.

He begins by explaining the journey that led him to writing the book. It's a journey that had taken him all over the world and to some places we might call God-forsaken. He tells of two encounters, both in Africa, which were the real catalysts for his change.

The first encounter takes place in Burundi. Do any of you know where Burundi is? No? Neither did he. Burundi's more infamous neighbour is Rwanda. Burundi has suffered the same fate as Rwanda as it too is home to both Tutsi and Hutu tribes. The darkness of genocide has visited Burundi a number of times. If you know little about the events of this part of the world then I can recommend the film Hotel Rwanda to begin your education.

McLaren was invited to visit Burundi by a man called Claude. During his visit Claude took him to meet with a group of Tutsi and Hutu church leaders. Claude began the session with these words.

“Friends, most of you know me. You know that I am the son of a preacher, and as a result I grew up going to church all the time, maybe five times a week. What may surprise you, though, is to learn that in all of my childhood, in all the church services I attended, I only heard one sermon.” The people listening were surprised and confused. He went on, “That sermon went like this: ‘You are a sinner and you are going to hell. You need to repent and believe in Jesus. Jesus might come back today, and if he does and you are not ready, you will burn forever in hell.’”

The people listening began to laugh. Not because Claude was funny, but because that was the only sermon they had ever heard too. Sunday after Sunday, different Bible verses but all leading to that same point.

Claude went on to describe the lives that the people in the room had shared; the years of hatred and murder, of mistrust and segregation.

He ended by saying ‘Over the years, I have come to realise that something is wrong with the way we understand Jesus and the Good News. Something is missing in the version of the Christian religion we received from the missionaries, which is the message we now preach ourselves. They told us how to go to heaven. But they left out an important detail. They didn’t tell us how the will of God could be done on earth.’

McLaren’s second encounter was in Capetown, South Africa where he met with a group of ministers. One of the group was strangely quiet throughout the discussion. Eventually McLaren asked him if he had something he wanted to say, and boy did he. He was an HIV/Aids worker from the townships. His message to the ministers was simple. Stop it. Stop coming into the township on a Sunday and preaching that one sermon.

The sermon that says ‘believe in Jesus and you will be healed’ because people believe you and stop taking their medication. Stop preaching the sermon that says ‘believe in Jesus and everything will get better’ because for these people it doesn’t get better. Stop preaching the sermon that says ‘you must be born again’. Being born again on a Sunday is fine but when they wake up on Monday their lives are just the same.

These two meetings changes McLaren’s life. Their message should change ours. It should change everything.

So today I’m going to try hard not to preach that one sermon. Not because I don’t believe that believing in Jesus makes your life better, because I do. Not because I don’t believe that faith is the greatest healer of all, because I do. And not because I don’t believe that we must all be spiritually born again, because I do.

But because the kingdom of heaven is a much misunderstood concept. We almost always think of heaven as somewhere other than here. The place where God lives with the angels and with the souls of those departed. I'm sure such a place exists but it isn't the *kingdom* of heaven Jesus was talking about.

The church is full of difficult things like conflict, fighting and division. But what is the cause of all these difficulties?

What if I was to say it was The Kingdom of Heaven? Well, not actually the kingdom of heaven, but our understandings of the kingdom of heaven and its effect on us. What if that's what causes all this division and ill feeling?

That doesn't sound like a good thing to me so I have a question for us all to ponder today. It is this: What difference does it make to the world that I follow Christ? Is the world a better place because I follow Christ?

That's a question I think we don't ask ourselves nearly enough. Perhaps we avoid it because it is a difficult question. Perhaps we avoid it because we don't know how to answer. Or perhaps we avoid it because we just don't know what difference our faith makes to us or to the world around us.

You see I'm convinced that the church here in the Western world has lost its way. I'm convinced that we have become far too good at preservation and not nearly good enough at innovation.

We have become what people call a post colonial power, a country that used to have an empire, that has been used to being in charge and listened to, but is now small and often ignored by the world around us.

Jesus sent out his twelve disciples, those fishermen and tax collectors and revolutionaries, to the poor and the sick. He did that for a reason. He didn't do it to change people from being Jews to Christians and he didn't do it to show off. It seems to me that the Western church has for centuries been far too much about both those two things. The church has too often said 'We want to help you and the best way for that to happen is for you to become like us. We want to help you so you will be able to tell others how good we are.'

The centuries have brought an uncomfortable convergence of church and state. Desmond Tutu once said to a gathering of world leaders 'When your missionaries came they asked us to close our eyes to pray. When we opened them they had stolen our land. May we have it back please?'

Tutu's words ring true in all kinds of ways and McLaren's stories bear out that truth but it's not just in Africa that we have fallen into the trap of equating the kingdom with western civilisation.

The two are not the same. I don't remember Jesus ever saying that the free market will solve anyone's problems. I don't remember Jesus saying make disciples of all people and make sure they give up their culture and become just like us. I don't remember Jesus saying that all the problems of the world are because of immigrants and people on benefit.

That is the challenge for the western church, for OUR church.

The church is supposed to be a place that gathers, sustains and inspires us. Where we share what we have with each other and with the poor. The church is supposed to be a place that enables us to make a difference. If it's not that then what's the point?

Jesus words about division and strife are simply an observation of how our little human minds with all our petty jealousy and grasping for power and control would react to the kingdom of Heaven. And boy was he right.

Jesus calls people and he sends out his followers to make a difference. Not to fill the church, not even to take names or even build churches. We are to heal the sick; to raise the dead and to preach the good news that if we treat each other well; if we stop our preoccupation with that one sermon; if we stop trying to make people more like us and start cherishing them for who they are, loved by God, that's when the Good News is good news. That's when the Kingdom Of Heaven is near.

That kingdom does not exist in our doctrines, in our creeds, our Statement of Faith and Order or in our ceremonies. It exists in our actions, in our words and in our deeds. The kingdom of heaven is in our hearts and our heads. It is a state of mind, a way of being. We can sing hymns, say prayers and listen to sermons and speeches and workshops all we like, but as St Paul reminds us, without love we are nothing.

So when we pray the Lord's Prayer and we get to those words that trip so easily from our tongues, 'Thy Kingdom come', remember the people of Burundi, of the townships of South Africa, of China, and Burma, Zimbabwe, Southern Sudan and Syria. The people here in our country who live in fear, in doubt and in shame. Thy kingdom come, on earth, as it is in heaven. That kingdom will come when we are the ones who believe it and build it.

People say that the church has lost confidence in the Gospel.

What if we haven't? After 150 years of numerical decline what if God is making of us his pioneers, a path no church wants to tread. What if God is shaping for his glory a people in a continent beyond the days of empire?

'The kingdom of heaven is not an easy thing to build. It will turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own

household.' Jesus said that. This isn't meant to be easy, but it is meant to bring life. It is Good News.

For the exiles, it took being very lost to discover that they were found. It took being very lost to discover that and their exile was actually lush and plentiful and full of life.

Isaiah spoke to those people who had been taken away to Babylon, those lost exiles. He told them that one day a new kind of king would come and things would be different. That the Kingdom of Heaven was near. That God was with them.

He told them that God hadn't forgotten them, even though they felt as though he had.

He told them that they were not lost.

He told them that there was hope.

Hope. There's that word again...

Hope that the God of love finds us, is with us, loves us, no matter how lost we are, or how found we feel.

Hope that God renews us in the most surprising and unexpected ways.

Hope that God is not done with us yet.

Thy Kingdom come, O lord. Amen