

18 April 2021: What about God's kingdom?

When they come to class, teachers usually know what they are talking about. But today's lesson is different. None of us have been to God's 'Right-way-up-world' so we can't talk from experience as we can about his other gifts. However God has given us some clues about his kingdom in the book of Revelation.

Revelation is the written account of a vision or a dream. Now dreams can be very muddled and complicated. So there is a great deal in Revelation that we can't really understand. Some people try to work out the details (eg what will happen when and exactly what the pictures mean), but Jesus told us that only God knows when things occur.

What we do know is that this vision was given to John (who had been Jesus' youngest disciple) when he was an old man. Because he was a leader in the churches he was arrested, tried and banished to the island of Patmos. This vision came to him as he was praying to encourage him and his people during the rough times of the Roman empire! He was told to share it. It reassured him (and continues to reassure us) that God is in control and that he is still at work bringing his kingdom into reality.

We don't have Romans around now but we still have evil. Now it is in the shape of tanks and fighter planes and viruses and computer hacking and fake news and people who hurt us. It seems to me that God chose to paint a set of two word pictures which each generation can interpret in terms of what is happening while we are on earth.

The first painting is full of swirls of clouds and lightning and light and dark patches of paint sloshed onto the canvas to create a sense of chaos and upset. This is a true picture of our upside-down-world. The second picture is totally different. It shows us God's right-way-up-world. It suggests calmness, beauty and peace without evil..

We know a lot about the upside-down-world with its evil, sickness, plagues, gruesome death, war, kidnappings, etc. So we aren't going to look at that painting today. Instead we are going to focus on the second painting in Revelation 21 and 22 – the last two chapters in the Bible. But when you have read these chapters you will discover that right through the Bible there have been hints of this peaceful picture for God has always planned his kingdom.

What is God's world like? Perhaps you want to group the positive and negative details.

1. Beautiful – like a bride (21:2, 11-14)
2. God lives there with his people (21:3, 22:3)
3. No tears (21:4)
4. No death or illness (21:4)
5. Full of light (21:23, 22:5)
6. Freedom for all who love God (21:25)
7. No evil (21:27, 22:3)

8. No wars (22:2)

What's not to like?

We don't like the thought of death because it might be uncomfortable and because it will mean leaving those we love and the world we know. But thanks to Easter we know that there is a far, far better place waiting for us. And this is the world that we see through this vision.

But the great news is that we don't have to wait till we die to be part of God's right-way-up-world! Although it sounds like really modern science (even though it was written hundreds of years ago) God's world is a parallel universe and exists alongside the world we know. The difference between science-fiction and God's world is that God's two worlds always intersect.

Some people only peep into God's world at Easter and Christmas; some ignore it completely, but those of us who have accepted that Jesus really did die for us are living in his real world already. It affects how we live in the upside-down or back-to-front world where our bodies are now and sometimes it makes living here quite difficult – as it did for John who got into trouble with the government; as it does for Christians living in countries where they aren't allowed to go to church. Even for us it may mean that living gets rough at times: the upside down world is so different that people don't understand what makes us tick. But we know God's light is shining there so it is worthwhile following on.

But the only way into his world is to be 'born again' into the new reality. Otherwise we shall only see it from afar off and never get there. We have to offload our sinful, self-promoting ways and accept a new passport: the badge of being one who accepts Jesus' love and discipline through life.

Readings

Monday: Genesis 28:11-17 (Jacob's dream of heaven)

Tuesday: Isaiah 65: 17-25 (NB: 'Jerusalem' means the place where God's people worship)

Wednesday: Revelation 21:1-8

Thursday: Revelation 21: 22-27

Friday: Revelation 22: 1-7