



Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase - Martin Luther King, Jr. Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace, so sure and certain that a man could stake his life on it a thousand times — Martin Luther

June 16th

The Shofar *Mark 4:26-34*

God is dead! Long live God!

In 1883 a German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche stunned the world by declaring that God is dead. His focus was not the divine being we call God but the Christian religion that was supposed to be living and working in the world to further the divine plan. His genius was proclaiming that the old ways of religion were dead.

He was attempting to come to grips with the ways in which Western culture was changing. He lived at a time of great societal upheaval. It was the time of the Enlightenment where science and rational thinking was becoming the only true and sustainable “religion”. The old structures of society and Church by which people had interpreted the world and human living were scattered into disarray. For Nietzsche, new lenses were needed for viewing and understanding the place and identity of men and women in creation.

We are the inheritors of that radical rearrangement of Truth and sadly, too many of our Bishops, clergy and lay people have taken on his more comfortable religion. Over the last hundred or so years we have been trying to shape the world using human models. Human reasoning and have taken up with enthusiasm the latest fads and philosophies – radical feminism, Black Lives Matter, on human sexuality, Marxism in its many guises, white privilege, the Bible as being locked in time limiting cultural ways, renewal using the popular methodologies of business and science, antisemitism, etc, etc. As today's readings affirm – this is never going to work.

God must be first, last and in the middle

The saying of Ezekiel in today's first reading proclaims the faithfulness of God, in which **[God]** holds fast to **[God's]** promises in **[God's]** history. The old promise given through Nathan to David in **the name of God** in 2 Samuel 7, that **God would give** to the people Israel a king from the house of David, a kingly line which was not to be allowed to die out through the catastrophes which Israel had suffered, which she had brought crushing down onto herself. Once God is moved from the centre of all things; when men and women set an agenda for God; when we seek to determine the way God's people are to be living disaster inevitably follows.

In the face of this sinfulness – unsuccessfully disguised as a lukewarm faithfulness - **God has a plan**. The emphasis here is important. This plan for renewal is not about what Israel can do; is not about programmes, committees, research and synods. It is all about God or it will fail. About God as a living reality driving the world from within our hearts and not some distant reality locked away in a distant heaven.

God has never stopped implementing his plan

The prophet's image is beautiful and succinct. God's plan involves a small twig taken from a towering cedar. God starts with something small to create important movements, to return the nation back to lives of faithfulness. That faithfulness is built on and permeated by what God has said and demands of us. While the world is bedazzled by the mighty cedar, God is planting a tiny twig from which the future comes.

The people of Israel, when they heard that there was going to be a restoration of the kingdom, they immediately thought of restoration in terms of the good old days. What things were like when Israel was initially taking shape. They anticipated the coming of a king who would defeat in battle the oppressive kingdoms of the world.

Israel immediately thought of establishing this Rule of God in the “normal” way: through violence. The defeat, humiliation and casting out of those with whom they were in conflict. Their Messiah would come with power and overcome the other kingdoms and so vindicate the ways they were thinking. God could only act in ways that made sense to people; could only demand of them responses that were reasonable given the times in which they were living.

Jesus as the little twig of God

In truth, the Kingdom Jesus is announcing is the Kingdom **of God** and it is very different to the usual way of understanding the nature of a

kingdom. It is perceived and experienced only by those who strive with all of *their soul, their strength and their minds* to live the entirety of their existence in Christ. God's Reign is a mysterious and at times a "hidden" gift. This is why, some two-thousand years later, God's kingdom still seems *not* to have arrived. Nominal Christians, along with many in the wider world cannot see the power of God's reigning at work because without a dynamic, life energising faith, it remains hidden from plain sight. They may go through the motions, but God is not with them.

The Reigning of God Jesus has come to live out and to proclaim exercises power in a very strange, and a very counterintuitive way. Be assured that we miss out on experiencing God reigning in our lives when we do not seek God, and keep on seeking God's will for us through our striving to imitate the faithfulness of Jesus who is the Christ (the anointed one, the messiah) of God.

God is reigning

Jesus has been performing miracles and signs illustrating the power of this Kingdom to heal and restore. He makes it very clear that God reigns with power. But this power is not going to be used to set up a kingdom in the normal sense of the word.

The Kingdom Jesus is announcing (*and this is the point in today's readings!*) is radically different. We can look and look with human hearts and cannot find it because the only way to the Father is in Jesus Christ and that requires a repentant heart and a transformed way of living in the world. That repentant heart and transformed way of living is outlined for us in the Sermon on the Mount in **Matthew 5-7**. Those teachings are not meant to be understood as being ideals for the saints. They set out for us the way we can live and experience the power of God at work in us.

Sadly, too many of our Christian communities find ourselves going the way of Israel of old. It is as if we think that by jazzing up our liturgies, developing newer and more modern laws and canons; by rewriting the Bible to consider modern sensibilities; by not making radical demands and not preaching about sin, the devil and the need for salvation, we will come alive, and the world will flock to us. We seem to be increasingly unwilling to accept that our shrinking congregations speak more about our individual and collective failures to live the Gospel we proclaim to others.

The Kingdom is all or nothing

The Jesus story is Good News precisely because its implementation and the road to soaking in its bountiful blessings does not depend on us alone. Thus, the best English translation of the Greek is ***the reigning of God*** rather than the Kingdom of God.

And so, we believe the Lord is at work all around us. He remains faithful even in the face of human sin and Christian lacklustre performances. **God achieves** what laws, canons, human traditions and an ungodly tendency to hang onto comfortable religion cannot achieve. If God is not building the Kingdom and its expressions on earth, we labour in vain.

All that is required of us is our striving to be open to the Way God wants us to go, a Way that is nothing other than the imitation of Christ. What God wants is lives sacrificed to Him and not more performance based religious lives.

Relax! God is in charge. Let God be God

This is the important message of Jesus. It is both a warning and a message of encouragement. It gives hope when all around us seems to be in decline and the world growing more and more hostile to religion. We are being reassured that **The Lord** plants. **The Lord** waters. **The Lord** makes it grow. This is the plan of God taken up and implemented by Jesus the Son of God. The plan of God is at work all around is if we have eyes to see, ears to hear and a humble and contrite heart. It is tough to live under that divine reign because it requires humility and self-sacrifice. As Jesus warns, the road to Life is narrow, rocky and along which it is incredibly difficult to walk. While we tackle that pilgrimage in faith, the Spirit will shower down upon us all of the graces we need to be faithful servants of the Almighty and live in His light.

We are never going to be the ones to accomplish the work of the Kingdom through our own efforts and power. This is God's guarantee to us. And it is this part of the Gospel that fills me with the greatest joy and the most comfort and hope. Even if the world is falling apart around us, we are going to continue to not just survive, but grow. Even when we find ourselves caught up in our human weaknesses and sins we need not give up. We should be at peace because it is **the Lord who is establishing** the Kingdom in which even sinners and tax collectors have a place set apart. **God Himself** is establishing His **reigning** on earth as He is reigns in heaven.