

Pentecost 2 – June 14, 2020 Cycle A

The term “gospel” is Old English for the Greek word “εὐαγγέλιον”(euaggelion) – “good announcement” or “good news”. But what’s that about? I mean, we’ve all heard “good news” of one kind or another, but we don’t call it “gospel”. I could, for example, announce that tomorrow it will rain and the high will only be 72°! Many would greet this news as “good”, but not “gospel” – as in the sense of a truth you can count on. The New Testament contains 4 books known as Gospels, but only Mark gives his writing that title... “The Beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mk 1:1). So somehow the “Good News” is associated with Jesus, with his life and ministry as recorded in the first 4 books of the New Testament. That narrows things, but only a little. For Matthew begins his “Gospel” with Jesus’ Genealogy; Luke by telling us that his is an “orderly account”; and John... John’s Gospel opening parallels that of Genesis: “In the beginning... was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”. All of the Gospels, it seems, give us “news” of Jesus Christ, but go about it quite differently. What John is “up to” is not at all clear, at least until we get to where he says, “The Word became flesh and lived among us”. There we learn for the first time that the “Word” is Jesus Christ. But is this the “Good News” – “news” so “good” that it takes 4 books to explain it? News of God’s Son, Jesus Christ? Yes, but more. The Good News is about what the appearance of God’s Son means for humanity, for the whole world – about the proximity, the “nearness” of God’s Kingdom, that Jesus sends his disciples out to proclaim: “The Kingdom of Heaven has come near” (Matt 10:7)!!!

This all seems very exciting, very good. But what does it mean? A clue is given in verse 8. There Jesus instructs his disciples to, “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out demons”. The “nearness” of God’s Kingdom, then, is connected to the banishment of death, disease, suffering, and evil! It would take a very grumpy person indeed to not perceive this kind of news as being good! Imagine, no death, no disease, no suffering, and evil is no where to be found! Where can we buy tickets to that destination? God’s Kingdom sounds like a very good place to go. And of course it is! So, is Jesus sending his disciples out to sell tickets? If so, how much do they cost? Jesus, of course, is not “selling” anything, at least not in the conventional way – certainly not tickets to heaven! This turns out to not be a bad thing. For if tickets were “for sale”, no one could purchase them! We don’t have the right currency! For Heaven is accessible only to those who have committed no sin. No human being other than Jesus has ever managed that, a life totally pleasing to God. And that is the “price” of entry!

“So”, you might be wondering, “What good is the Kingdom being ‘near’ – no matter how ‘good’ it is – if you can’t get in? What’s the “good news” in that?” Here it is, although the “ticket” to God’s Kingdom is totally beyond our ability to purchase, God is offering this once-in-a-lifetime deal: follow Jesus, trust in his word and teaching, and God will “wave” the price of entry! Amazing Good News! But why has God chosen to do this, allow entry to heaven “free of charge”? To get the answer, like the Gospel of John, you have to go back to “the beginning”.

Last week I spoke about the wisdom revealed in Genesis. That’s where our answer lies. If you recall, God created Eden – a paradise filled with everything anyone could ever want or

need. And God placed Adam and Eve there, “innocent as doves”. All God asked was that they obey one rule, “Don’t eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil”. Of course, we all know what happened. Adam and Eve couldn’t resist. That wanted to make their own choices in life, and so they rejected God’s direction in favor of their own. On account of their sin, Adam and Eve and all humanity after them were banned from paradise – with no way back. Genesis’ revealed wisdom: human beings always reject God’s direction in favor of their own. It’s our “condition”; it’s who we are. Therefore, like Adam and Eve we are barred from paradise. And so we would always be... except for God’s “one-time deal” in Jesus Christ!

Listen again to what Jesus directs his disciples to do, “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, [and] cast out demons” (Matt 10:8). He’s telling them to reverse the consequences of our sin – the reality of the world outside of heaven! Jesus has told the disciples to announce the Good News, the “nearness” of God’s Heavenly Kingdom. And as proof that his words are true, that he can be trusted, Jesus gives them the authority to repeal the “curse” of our sin – the death, disease, and suffering caused by our rejection of God! “God’s Kingdom is near! You can tell that by the things that are happening around you!” That’s the message Jesus orders his disciples to enact as they go to “the lost sheep” of Israel!

It’s all very Good News... except for this one “catch”: we must be willing to receive the Good News of God’s Kingdom. That is, we must be willing to accept God’s Authority to judge “good and evil” – over and above our own ideas. In particular, we must accept the Authority of God’s Son, Jesus Christ as The Standard of good and evil in the world! Among other passages, this news is revealed just after the end of today’s Gospel, “Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven” (Matt 10:33-34). This is not merely a denial of faith, but a denial of Jesus’ Authority as God’s Son, as the one person who embodies God’s model of “good” in “the flesh”. To have faith in Jesus is to accept and follow his example of life! And God promises that all who do so will be welcome in God’s heavenly and everlasting Kingdom! On this we have Jesus’ word; the solemn promise of God’s Only Son! Accept it and you will have life! Reject it, and like deciding “good and evil” for yourself, you’re on your own. You should, however, remember, “Sodom and Gomorrah”. They had never heard of Jesus or God’s promise in him. What excuse will we be able to offer?

If we truly understand that our choices are not “good”, that we can never be “good enough” to warrant a “ticket” into heaven, then we can perceive that God’s offer in Jesus Christ is truly Good News. The Way is open before us! Trusting to yourself is just foolish. Accept God’s promise in Jesus Christ and live, or continue to do things “as you see fit” and risk the consequences! I, for one, know with certainty that I am not up to the task. My only hope is Jesus Christ! The Good News is that God sent Jesus into the world with just this offer in mind, for “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8)! In love, “in the beginning” God made Adam and Eve and wanted only the best for them. In love, God sent Jesus Christ to restore a relationship with humanity that once seemed completely lost. **But it is not**. “The Kingdom of heaven is near!” Amen