

God's belief in us transforms us to transform the world

Sermon by Andy Wurm, 22nd Sunday after Pentecost, 21st October 2018

Two of Jesus' disciples (James and John) ask to be given places next to him in glory. We might consider that rude, but Jesus doesn't. At least the gospel writer presents him as not bothered by it. He merely has Jesus point out those spots are already reserved. Reading further in the story, we discover that while on the cross, two bandits are crucified on Jesus' right and left side. As his crucifixion is his 'moment of glory', does this mean the bandits share in Jesus' glory?

Rather than dismissing their request, Jesus challenges James and John, as to whether they really understand what they're asking for. He points out that receiving the reward goes hand in hand with suffering. 'Drinking the cup that Jesus drinks, or 'being baptised with the baptism he is baptised with' means following in his footsteps, which we know, lead to the cross.

James and John's confidence in their ability to do that isn't well received by the rest of the disciples, who are angry about their request. Notice that they are the ones who get a lecture from Jesus, not James and John. This reinforces the fact that Jesus has no problem with their desire to receive a reward for following him. But as yet, we don't know what the reward is.

The anger of the other disciples reflects their competitive mindset. They're angry that James and John might be getting something they won't. Jesus' response to them is very revealing. He contrasts the 'Way' he lives and invites others to live, with the way the world operates, where those with power lord it over others. We see it in the largest empires and the smallest desire to get our way at other's expense. It's whenever power is used to control others by force.

The way of lording it over others is found in cultures around the world. It is the major dehumanising force in the world. The disciples' anger at James and John getting something they will miss out on, demonstrates they are stuck in that competitive mode where they're either winners or losers. It shapes how they see the world and how they behave. Actually, James and John aren't all that different. Knowing there's only two spots either side of Jesus in his glory, they got in first, ensuring they wouldn't miss out. Why no lecture from Jesus for them then? Well, this shows two things – firstly that Jesus was utterly committed to dismantling competitive living, in which people lorded it over others, and the second thing it shows us is that he didn't do it by force, but by gentle coercion. He didn't criticise James and John for desiring the best places next to him, rather, he encouraged them to desire something better. This is the process of spiritual transformation, where the ego is replaced with the 'Christ-consciousness', so we end up like St. Paul, who said 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'. It's about replacing our mindset with the mindset of Christ.

It is common for people to assume that the aim of Christianity is to win eternal life, which is usually assumed to involve getting into heaven with other believers, where we shall enjoy a wonderful afterlife in a spiritual state that goes on forever. This is not the case though. This idea of eternal life is not Christian, but comes from Plato, who did not write the gospels. The gospels actually have little about life after death. They are concerned far more with life before death. Remember that Christianity arose out of Judaism, which was always quite materialistic, in the sense of focussing on this physical world, rather than some other form of existence or afterlife. The ancient Hebrews didn't think that God was going to rescue them from this world, or from death. They looked forward to God transforming this world into something better.

Following in the line of Hebrew prophets, Jesus was faithful to this belief, calling his version of the world transformed by God 'the kingdom of God'. It was very much an alternative to the world of empire, the world of competitive rivalry. Some believe that the most important theme of the gospels is that God saves us from sin, but it's not. The most important theme of the gospels is the coming of the kingdom of God, which can be translated as 'the Dream of God' (Verna Dozier), or if you want a longer version, 'a friendly world of friendly folk, beneath a friendly sky' (Howard Thurman).

Jesus, in his life and death, ushers in the 'friendly world', by exposing the dehumanising way of empire, and then showing us that God is for us. The last line of our gospel reading speaks of Jesus as a 'ransom for many'. Typically, this is interpreted as meaning Jesus' death sort of pays the fine for our sin. And that can be a way of explaining what Jesus does with human sin. But we must realise that in no way is this a payment to God. It is payment to humanity. In fact, the very demand for payment to make up for sin is the essence of what human sin is. The demand that payment be made for 'breaking the rules' is an expression of competitive rivalry. It's an example of the way of empire, competition, control through oppressive power.

Jesus (or the gospel writer through his voice) explains that the way to true life (eternal life) is by living out the kingdom of God, in which service of others is the blueprint for attitude and behaviour. It is the way to true life, because it is entering into the way God is in the world, and it is entering into the way God is transforming the world. And the ultimate expression of that, which we call his glory, is Jesus on the cross. I'll explain why.

In order for God to win our cooperation in God's transformation of the world, God has to get us to see that God is our friend. That's not easy, because being caught up in a competitive way of living, we see God as a competitor with us. (Hence, we project onto God the requirement of sacrifice to pay for the breaking of rules.) It is hard for us to trust God therefore, so God has to come to us in a way that is totally not that. And that's what the crucifixion is. So, if you ask what God is like, God who is for us and wants to work with us to transform the world, the answer is on the cross: a dead human being. Can you think of anything less threatening? Anything less powerful? This is the ultimate in service – laying down of power for others, in fact, for the world. So God comes to us as this powerless One, totally devoid of competitiveness or desire to control and says he wants to transform the world, but is only going to do that in cooperation with us. So, it's cooperation, but we're in charge.

It's hard to conceptualise God cooperating with every person (or in fact the whole creation), but we can perhaps conceptualise something of God cooperating with us as individuals. We might feel hesitant, because we know we're a bit like James and John. Even the humblest among us want a bit of glory (until we realise what real glory is – although maybe even then we do). We know we're trapped in the competitive way. But God is freeing us from that, enticing us by a reward, through transforming our desires. The reward is the kingdom of God: 'a friendly world of friendly folk, beneath a friendly sky'. Even in a world of competition and lording it over others, we can participate in that. We are enticed into that by the crucified One, who is so vulnerable with us, so non-demanding. Do you ever get frustrated because God won't answer your prayers, telling you what to do? That's because God never tells you what to do. This is God's way of saying 'I believe in you', just like a good friend does. The more I listen to that, the more I change, so that my ego transforms into Christ, the One who believes in me, who trusts me to create new ways of living, new ways of relating to each other, but that Christ in me is also the real me. There are so many people already doing this, but it's not obvious to the untrained observer, who also can never understand why the cross is God's glory.