

Catalysing Kingdom Communities

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Let us pray. 'God of time and eternity, if I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone.'

From Escape to Embodiment

'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.' (John 10.10) Christians don't have to look far for a mission statement for the church. Living abundant life. That's what the Father intends, the Son embodies, the Spirit facilitates. Christians are called to live in such a way that gratefully *receives* the abundance God is giving them, *evidences* the transformation from scarcity to abundance to which God is calling them, *dwells* with God in that abundant life, and *shares* that abundance far and wide. Jesus is our model of abundant life; his life, death and resurrection chart the transformation from the scarcity of sin and death to the abundance of healing and resurrection; he longs to bring all humankind into reconciled and flourishing relationship with God, one another, themselves and all creation. Discipleship describes inhabiting that abundant life. Ministry involves building up the church to embody that abundant life. Mission names the ways that abundant life is practised, shared and discovered in the world at large.

So far so good. (Everyone on board so far?) Nothing not to like. So, as doctors say, what seems to be the problem? Well, round about 1860 something important began to change. People started to stop believing in hell. It was on both philosophical and moral grounds. They 'did the math' and worked out that while ten million years of roasting in hell seemed in order for the most unspeakable sinners, ten million is less than a drop in the ocean compared to eternity. Meanwhile the agonies and horrors of hell seem hard to reconcile with the grace and mercy of God. It takes a while to comprehend just how much of a revolution in the Christian faith arose from people starting to stop believing in hell. There are two closely related dimensions.

First, the central purpose of church needs a rethink. It can no longer be principally a mechanism for delivering people from the perils of damnation to the joys of the Elysian Fields. Hence the choice of words of my opening prayer. God is no longer an instrument for conveying us upstairs rather than downstairs. God is not fundamentally a means to the end of securing our eternal survival and bliss. God is an end: 'If I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone.' The central purpose of the church is no longer to reconcile people to God so their eternal salvation will no longer be in jeopardy; it is to invite people to enjoy God just as God enjoys them. God embraces them for their own sake, not for some ulterior purpose: they should embrace God likewise.

Second, the attitude of church to world needs to change. From the evading-hell perspective, the world is characterised by the flesh and pervaded by the devil, so worldly existence is largely to be spent escaping the earthly realities around us and encouraging others to do so. The church offers sanctuary, heavenly medicine, protection and training for avoiding earthly snares and temptations. But a different view of God leads to an alternative understanding of the world. No longer is life about dodging the flesh of this world in order to merit the spirit of the next. Now the world has a validity of its own. All has not been lost in the Fall. The Holy Spirit is doing surprising, exuberant, and plentiful things in the world. The church is called not simply to guide people's escape from the world, but to celebrate creation, enjoy culture, and share in flourishing life.

There are four main problems with the evading-hell model of church. First, it diminishes God by seeing the Trinity not as an end to be glorified in itself but as a means to rescue us from torment or oblivion. Second, it impoverishes the world by seeing it as a prison to be escaped rather than a theatre, playground and garden to be enjoyed. Third, it misrepresents the church by understating its shortcomings while overstating the deficiencies of the world. Fourth, it depletes the church by depriving it of and blinding it to the abundant gifts God has to give it through the world.

I'm not suggesting that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, in the context of Israel and the early church, in other words the witness of scripture, is not central in the life of the church. It's central because it shows us the heart of God, and it shows us the paradigm of abundant life. We wouldn't know what abundant life was had God not shown it to us in Jesus. But our attention to the specific, definitive embodiment of full divinity and full humanity in Jesus shouldn't inhibit our seeing the manifestations of Christ's presence brought about by the Holy Spirit in the world around us. Quite the opposite: learning to discern Christ in scripture should make disciples the more adept at perceiving Christ made present through the Holy Spirit today. The evading-hell approach tends to concentrate on how to convey to the maximum number of people the specific benefits secured by Christ's passion, so as to ensure those people seek those benefits and are accordingly delivered unto heaven. By contrast the abundant-life approach seeks to shape communities whose habits and practices anticipate and portray the life of heaven. The focus is not only on the Holy Spirit making present what Christ did long ago; it's also on paying attention to and being transformed by the ways Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit is being made known today.

Our doctrine has, whisper it quietly, changed – or, as the Catholics would say, developed. The trouble is that the structures of our church have lagged behind. For the most part our churches are still set up to achieve the evading-hell goal. We still take people out of the world for an intense hour or two a week to be transported to heaven and thus to be restored or fuelled or inspired to face the challenges of their lives. We tend to define spirituality in tension with and superior opposition to materiality. We regard true devotion as a retreat that takes us away from the world or contemplative prayer that occurs in silent seclusion from the world. We have a banking model of mission, that assumes we need to stock up on scriptural and theological knowledge and then in mission communicate as much of that knowledge as we can to unwary people who, by definition as part of the world, are characterised only by their lack of such knowledge and the godliness that we take to come with it.

What I want to do today is to describe what a different mindset might look like – a mindset that reflects abundant life; what I'd like to call a kingdom mindset. I'm going to talk about three things: the convictions of kingdom communities, the constraints on kingdom communities, and the characteristics of kingdom communities.

The Convictions of Kingdom Communities

Kingdom communities believe that Jesus' life offers us a template to talk about our lives, about the church and about the world – or, to use the jargon, discipleship, ministry and mission. I want to speak about how the four key convictions of kingdom communities arise out of the template of Jesus' life. I'm going to call those four key convictions Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost.

Christmas proclaims that every good thing of God and creation can be embodied in just one single life. God is infinite spirit: but the whole wonder of God can be communicated in one mortal, finite, material body. The incarnation makes clear that human flesh can convey ultimate truth; it can express not just fallibility and limitation but glory and grace. The parable speaks of one slave that buried his talent in the hillside and two that took theirs to market to face the risk of encounter. God is that slave who took the talent of creative love to the hurly-burly of creation rather than bury it in the safe hillside of sequestered eternity. We look on our human form and see its weakness and its folly; the Holy Spirit looks on our human form and makes it capable of opening a window onto heaven and a vision into the heart of God. Sin is not living it up, existing too much; on the contrary, sin is failing to live to the full, refraining from embracing life in all its extent, focusing one's desires and energies on something less than, and unworthy of, the kingdom. Christmas tells us we meet God not by withdrawing from life, but by immersing ourselves in it.

We lament the scarcity of God, assuming God should be everywhere and always; but Christmas shows us the abundance of God, the fullness of whom was pleased to dwell there and then. Through Christmas we learn not to search for mammon, the things that run out – comparison and competition, and their children, envy and greed – but to love the things that God gives in plenty,

that never run short – love, joy, peace. God is plenty. Joy is to find and be overwhelmed by the abundance of God. Sin is the fear that we won't have enough and the vain search to find security elsewhere.

Good Friday proclaims that there's no limit to which God will not go to be with us – indeed, that to be with us forever Jesus will not only yield up his life but will even temporarily jeopardise his being with the Father. But *Good Friday* also embodies a paradox: that at humanity's lowest moment, at God's most horrifying moment, humanity is the closest it could ever be to God. This is the image that epitomises the Christian faith: the naked, exposed, forsaken Jesus, the unmistakable manifestation of our inseparability from God. In this is love, not that God conquers, not that we excel, but that when we disclose our very worst, God does not let us go. This expresses a strand of biblical faith that goes back to Judah's exile in Babylon. Deprived of land, king and temple, Judah yet discovers that it is closer to God than ever it was in the Promised Land. If I love thee for hope of heaven, then deny me heaven; if I love thee for fear of hell, then give me hell; but if I love thee for thyself alone, then give me thyself alone. Judah had previously loved God for the hope of heaven or the fear of hell: now Judah says, 'Give me yourself alone' – and God replies, 'Here is myself alone.'

And the conviction that this reveals is that there's a window into the heart of God that can be seen by those who experience adversity but is invisible to the comfortable. Which transforms mission. Mission is no longer the wise trying to make the foolish less foolish or the comfortable trying to make the distressed more comfortable. Now it is discipleship, because it is people recognising that, if they are not being themselves oppressed, the chances are they are unconsciously implicated in or at least beneficiaries of the process of oppressing, and they must choose whose side to be on. And it's ministry, because it's the church perceiving that if it's to see God truly, it must be beside those who see God best, which is those who are on the cross or in exile. Which is why inclusion is such a problematic word. Inclusion is a word the comfortable use to say 'We are a bunch of people in the centre whose lives are normal and sorted and privileged, and we really ought to open the doors and welcome people in and be a bit more thoughtful and kind and generous.' That makes inclusion is a patronising and paternalistic model. It assumes a centre and a periphery, where the centre gives kindly hospitality to the periphery, so the periphery feels humiliated and the centre feels smug. The comfortable need the oppressed more than the oppressed need the comfortable. If the comfortable experience their life as scarcity, it's most likely because they've closed their eyes to the gifts God is giving them in those they choose to regard as other.

The right questions are, 'If I'm oppressed, am I allowing myself to see God with clarity and humanity with mercy? If I'm not oppressed, is it because I'm complicit in perpetrating or overlooking oppression, and if I stopped being so wouldn't I quickly find myself oppressed too? And even if I'm not so colluding, if I want to see God, don't I know where God has promised most explicitly to be made known, in the lives of those who are oppressed, so isn't it time I hung out there, not assuming my role is to transform those lives, but first and most importantly to learn from them and see the world and God through their eyes?'

Easter offers a definition and redefinition of past and future. Human existence is experienced as a prison because of our panic about the past and the fear of the future. There's no genuine living in the present tense because our lives are dominated by bitterness and grief and humiliation about the past, and paralysed by anxiety and terror and horror about the future. *Easter* proclaims two central convictions. One about sin, and one about death. One about the past, and one about the future. The first is about the past. It's the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness doesn't change the past. But it releases us from the power of the past. Forgiveness doesn't rewrite history. But it prevents our histories asphyxiating us. Forgiveness transforms our past from an enemy to a friend, from a horror-show of shame to a storehouse of wisdom. In the absence of forgiveness we're isolated from our past, pitifully trying to bury or deny or forget or destroy the many things that haunt and overshadow and plague and torment us. Forgiveness doesn't change these things: but it does change their relationship to us. No longer do they imprison us or pursue us or surround us or stalk us. Now they accompany us, deepen us, teach us, train us. No longer do we hate them or curse them or resent them or begrudge them. Now we find acceptance, understanding, enrichment, even gratitude for them. That's the work of forgiveness. It's about the transformation of the prison of the past.

And the second Easter conviction is about the future. The life everlasting. Everlasting life doesn't take away the unknown element of the future: but it takes away the paroxysm of fear that engulfs the cloud of unknowing. Everlasting life doesn't dismantle the reality of death, the crucible of suffering, the agony of bereavement: but it offers life beyond death, comfort beyond suffering, companionship beyond separation. In the absence of everlasting life we're terrified of our future, perpetually trying to secure permanence in the face of transitoriness, meaning in the face of waste, distraction in the face of despair. Everlasting life doesn't undermine human endeavour, but it rids it of the last word; evil is real, but it won't have the final say; death is coming, but it doesn't obliterate the power of God; identity is fragile, but that in us that resides in God will be changed into glory. Easter says there is forgiveness – so the past is a gift; and there is everlasting life – the future's our friend. That's what freedom means. We can truly exist. That's the gospel.

Pentecost proclaims that the work of reconciliation was not only the work of Jesus, incarnate among us, but is the central work of the church in ministry and mission. The church has no deeper work than reconciliation, between people and God, creation, one another and themselves. Every calling of ministry and mission is but an element of reconciliation, which involves telling a truthful story, proceeds through apology, penance and repentance, and issues in forgiveness, reconciliation, healing and resurrection. Justice isn't a virtue in itself – neither is truth, or even mercy: each finds its true meaning as a step on the way to reconciliation. When we weary of the ministry of reconciliation, exasperated that it's slow, or embarrassed that it's necessary, all we do is turn our hand to a more pliable or plausible context for reconciliation. There isn't anything else.

Baptism is the embodiment of reconciliation with God; the Eucharist is a paradigm of how reconciliation with God creates and makes possible a reconciled community. The term we use for instances of reconciliation, or steps on the way, or changed hearts, healed minds, energised bodies, renewed spirits, released souls that sketch the penumbra of reconciled feelings, words, gestures and action – that term is Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the action of God that makes present today the reconciliation Jesus enacted once and for all. Sometimes that's through the ministry of the church; sometimes it's in the world in spite of the church; sometimes the church finds the humility to enjoy the reconciliation the Holy Spirit brings about in the world without the church's fingerprints getting on it.

Christmas, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost name the four key convictions of kingdom communities. But we could call them abundance, grace, freedom and reconciliation.

The Constraints on Kingdom Communities

I went to see a woman of advanced years. She'd grown up in Wales. She'd left the church when she was a young woman. Ah, I thought, is a familiar story. She flew the nest. But now that she's over 90, she's giving the church a second chance. Took her time, but, we've been patiently waiting for you all this while, like the father for the prodigal. I took a slight risk. 'D'you mind me asking what it was that led you to be away from the church for 75 years?' But I forgot a basic rule: never ask a question to which you might get an answer you're not ready to hear.

'It was when we wanted to get married. We were in love. The minister wouldn't marry us.' Well, this sounds romantic, I thought, and, always a soft touch for romance, I blundered in where angels fear to tread. 'So was there something wrong? Was your husband previously married, or were you too young, maybe?' 'No,' she said calmly, trying hard not to be patronising or angry. 'The minister looked at my hand. You see, I worked in a mill. I had an accident when I was 16.' She gently, undemonstratively, held up her left hand. The last three fingers were missing. 'The minister said that, since I didn't have a finger to put the wedding ring on, he couldn't marry us.'

The colour drained from my face, and I reacted with the disbelieving half-laugh one coughs out when one hears something so ridiculous that it just has to be funny, but in fact isn't funny at all but deeply, deeply horrifying. It was so absurd that no one could make it up. It had to be true. Quickly I felt that 75 years away from the church was pretty lenient. 'And dare I ask what brings you back to the church now?' 'God's bigger than the church,' she replied. 'I'll be dead soon. The Lord's Prayer says forgive if you want to be forgiven. So in the end that's what I've decided to do.'

I tell this story because I believe it well illustrates what is stopping us embodying kingdom communities. The church has made God's love too narrow with false strictures of its own. It has imposed class, gender, race and other thresholds that contradict the shape of God's kingdom. It has regarded the gospel and salvation as its own possession to dispense and withhold. It has failed to distinguish between seekers, the lapsed, those of no professed faith, those of other faiths, and the hostile, and judged them all as one, not realising that the lapsed are astray as often because of the church's shortcomings because as their own, that those of no professed faith are not the same as the hostile, and that Welsh millworker hints at a story in which the lapsed are those who await the opportunity to save the church. After 75 years, she gives the church another chance. The question is, whether the church is ready to seize that chance second time around. It's a question that might make us shudder to answer.

The point is that churches are often quick to attribute their plight to a hostile culture or an indifferent, distracted population or even a sinful generation; but much slower to recognise that their situation is significantly of their own making. I was blessed that Welsh millworker even considered it worth her time talking to me. It's amazing anyone comes to church at all, given the way they're too often treated. The problem isn't simply occasional thoughtlessness and bad-apple perversity. It's a whole mind-set that seeks social superiority by making the church a refuge of the worthy, the advantaged, the tasteful and the assured, establishing blue water between it and the soiled, the complex, the untidy and the distressed, and calls that blue water God.

The Characteristics of Kingdom Communities

A few weeks ago in my own congregation a passion narrative was performed during the Palm Sunday morning service. The part of Jesus was played by a young man from Afghanistan. The disciples were a rag-tag bunch. One was a congregation member with a subcontinent background, another a homeless UK national who often attends weekday morning prayer. Judas was a Malaysian congregation member. The other nine were members of the weekly 45-strong asylum-seekers group that meets every Sunday afternoon – including a Kurdish Iranian, a Ugandan, a Jamaican and a South African. One was a Ghanaian who had spent two years travelling to the UK, crossing the Mediterranean from North Africa in a boat and waiting for many weeks in the Calais Jungle. The members of the Sanhedrin were dressed like the FBI – the epitome of white machismo. Instead of whipping the Afghan Christ, they waterboarded him. A tall, well-built, confident middle-aged New Yorker played Pilate. When he said 'What is truth?' we in the congregation shivered. When he said 'The people have spoken,' we shivered again. We were half waiting for him to say 'Crucifixion means crucifixion.' When Jesus was taken down from the cross and laid on the altar, the Ghanaian who played the Beloved Disciple handled the dead body with such care it was clear he'd done such things many times before.

The British public sees these people as a threat or at best an administrative burden. The churches tend to see them as objects of pity and mercy. On Palm Sunday they were none of these things. They were prophets, preachers, provocative witnesses to the gospel, challenging a congregation, used to thinking of themselves as edgy and politically engaged, with the question of where each party stood in the passion story. This was the first time they had led us into worship. In the past, members of our asylum-seeker group had joined our fellowship by acting as wicket-keeper or demon opening bowler in our cricket team, or as waiter for our hospitality events. But on Palm Sunday they were swept up into the passion narrative itself. And they changed the whole way we thought about the story we thought we knew.

If you're looking for a cornerstone, the best place to look is among the stones that the builders have rejected. Over the last few years I've attended a number of events around dementia, disability, and faith. At one such evening what electrified the room was when a person with dementia spoke with wisdom, courage, and truth. Two friends had sat with her for several hours and recorded her insights and reflections. They then typed up those remarks and she was more than capable of reading them out to the captivated gathering. Those with dementia must be among the most rejected in our society, but that night it was brilliantly obvious that the Holy Spirit was speaking through her. One disability event began with a person with autism describing in unforgettable

detail what it would have felt like for a person like him to be present in the crowd at the first Palm Sunday, and how the sensory overload would have done his head in. No one listening could ever see all the hosannas and palm branches in such an innocent way again.

Some while ago I attended an event for single people, in which participants explored the advantages and disappointments, sadness and opportunity of being voluntarily or involuntarily single. Again it was a discovery of solidarity, wisdom, and hope. On another occasion there was an event for those fleeing oppressive societies on account of their sexual identity. These were stones the builders had rejected if you ever saw them: but coming together in the company of others who'd been rejected in different ways they could find inspiration and purpose beyond fear and escape. One of the particular ministries my own church has developed is in what you might call acute pastoral services. We have gatherings for those affected by suicide, to support families of the missing, to remember victims of homicide, to commemorate those who've died homeless. The one thing that these occasions all proclaim is that wisdom and faith are found in the places of exile and rejection. It's on such wisdom and faith that kingdom communities are founded.

We're not talking about a bland and affirming insight that a lot of people who've been overlooked in life turn out to have some important things to contribute. The stone that the builders rejected didn't find a place in the wall somewhere by being thoughtfully included like a last-minute addition to a family photo. The rejected stone became the cornerstone, the keystone – the stone that held up all the others, the crucial link, the vital connection. The rejected stone is Jesus. In his crucifixion he was rejected by the builders – yet in his resurrection he became the cornerstone of forgiveness and eternal life. That's what ministry and mission are all about – not condescendingly making welcome alienated strangers, but seeking out the rejected *precisely because they are the energy and the life-force that will transform us all*. Every minister, every missionary, every evangelist, every disciple should have these words over their desk, their windscreen, on their screensaver, in the photo section of their wallet, wherever they see it all the time – the stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. *If you're looking for where the future church is coming from, look at what the church and society has so blithely rejected*. The life of the church is about constantly recognising the sin of how much we have rejected, and celebrating the grace that God gives us back what we once rejected to become the cornerstone of our lives. That's what prophetic ministry means.

You may have come across Antonio Vivaldi. My congregation is pretty indebted to Vivaldi, because his Four Seasons is our biggest money-spinner. It's performed around 20 times a year and visitors love it. But it turns out there's more to Vivaldi than the rites of spring. He lived from 1678-1741 and spent most of his life in Venice.

But this is where it gets interesting. How did Vivaldi earn a living? When he wrote his *Magnificat* he was working as choir master at an institution known as the Pietà. This was a charitable home for foundlings. Now, one may say an orphanage was pretty lucky to acquire the services of one of the greatest composers of the Western European musical tradition. But look more closely. How did the orphanage fund its work? It had a fascinating and brilliant business model. It trained its orphans to sing for their supper. Vivaldi's job was to compose pieces of music and train his choir of young orphans to sing them, so as to attract to chapel services a wealthy congregation who would, through their donations and bequests, support and finance the institution. And there's another dimension: Catholic Europe did not countenance mixed church choirs in the early eighteenth century. The boys would leave the orphanage and enter apprenticeships. It was left to the girls to make up the choir. If you look at the score of the *Magnificat*, you'll see that the vocal bass parts are pitched high enough that they can be sung by the all-female choir of the Pietà.

Notice the ways this business model marks the Pietà and its imitators out as a dynamic form of social enterprise. It doesn't depend on pity; it doesn't begin with scarcity. It starts with people's talents and promise, not their neediness and suffering. It doesn't assume the people with the money have the answers and the solutions while the people without the money have the problems and the tragedy. It's a philosophy of abundance. But neither is it naïve: the children are not the finished article – they need training, like anyone else; and they need to sing really good music – so people come to hear lively music, not to patronise the poor. But in learning to be a choir, the

children learn the skills to be a human being: partnership, discipline, teamwork, training – and, yes, business sense and entrepreneurial imagination.

Antonio Vivaldi embodied the characteristics of kingdom communities. He saw the orphans, not as burdens or objects of duty or pity, but as prophets of the kingdom. He built a cultural, charitable and commercial project out of conditions of exile, abandonment and adversity. Everyone knows he was a composer. Some people also know he was a violinist. Hardly anyone remembers he was a priest. He wasn't just making a sustainable charitable institution, worthy as that is. He was renewing the church; and embodying the kingdom.

Which is what you're all here this week to do. May God bless you as you discern the stones that the builders rejected, and discover in them the gifts God is giving you to enter abundant life.