

A Sermon for the Sixth Sunday of Easter

Canon Paul M. Kompass May 17, 2009

“This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith.” 1 John 5:4

What do you think of when you hear the word “world”?

What images come into your mind?

The vast reaches of a mysterious incomprehensible universe?

A blue planet suspended in empty space?

The global community of the nations and their leaders?

A beautiful sunlit landscape dotted with spring flowers and caressed with warm breezes and songs of birds?

The rich diversity of human life from the incredibly wealthy and privileged and powerful to the homeless, marginalized and impoverished.

A noisy downtown street jammed with traffic and crowds of busy people amid towering skyscrapers?

A particular realm of human enterprise such as the business world or scientific world or educational or health care or international affairs?

In personal terms, the word “world” may suggest “my world”, all that attracts my attention and touches my life in big and little ways.

In scripture, the world is understood as all that God has called into being. The world comes out of God and is sustained by God’s constant attention and involvement. The world, its past, present and future, are “in his hands” as it were. We call it the Creation – the *“vast expanse of interstellar space, galaxies, suns, planets in their courses, and this fragile earth our island home”* [Anglican Book of Alternative Services pg 201] with its primal elements – soil, water, air, light, heat – and the rich diversity of continually evolving forms of life that depend upon them.

This world is an object of God’s love. God called the world into existence and loves it. It is intended to glorify its creator. The world is created as a good and blessed thing.

In scripture, the world is seen as distinct from heaven, another world apart from this one – a place of perfect love, the dwelling place of God.

However, in his Gospel, John the Evangelist refers to the world as having a character that is somehow opposed to God. Even though God loves the world, the world does not love God . . . not very well, if at all. So there is a kind of hostility, bad vibes between the world and God, a disorder that is corrupting, not life sustaining. The world has fallen out of favour with its Creator and Sustainer. In the world, children of God are despised, hated and rejected, because they do not conform to worldly ways but follow God’s ways.

John’s world is the world of life on this planet and even more particularly, life in the human community. Walter Wink, a great biblical interpreter and teacher, writes in the Christian Century: *“The Greek term “world” (kosmos) in the New Testament usually refers not to the*

physical universe but to an interlocking network of Powers - political, economic, cultural, ideological - that have turned their backs on their divine vocations and idolatrously set themselves up in defiance of God. I call this total world system of oppression the Domination System. Characterized by inequality, patriarchy, economic injustice, hierarchicalism and racism, the whole edifice is constructed and maintained by violence.”

I am not sure I agree with all that he says here. But this is a something experienced by each and every one of us, this interlocking network of powers, economic and social forces in defiance of God. St. Paul used the phrase *“the rulers, the authorities, the cosmic powers of this present darkness, the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”* Ephesians 6:12

This present darkness that corrupts and destroys life in the world is a very real spiritual power. It grips the world that God loves and moves humans to turn their backs on God and his love, and to pursue the aims of a dominating network of political, economic, cultural and ideological powers opposed to life and God.

In the writings of John the Evangelist, the world is portrayed as a darkness, an enemy that hates and rejects God and the children of God. It rejects Jesus. The death of Jesus is the image of this life destroying power at work in the human world. Jesus’ crucifixion is about the dark reality that crucifies human life.

But John writes not only of darkness, but also of light, of victory, of resurrection and life. Faith is a victory that overcomes the world. Faith and trust in the love which Jesus has for us enables us to rise up and live, even in the face of those powers which would crucify humanity.

Furthermore, through our friendship with Jesus, we can escape being ensnared in unjust systems of government policy or commercial exploitation, resist the corrupting influences of lust and greed and the false notions of what makes life truly good, rise above the stigmas of complacency and indifference, ignorance and fear, and mobilize love, courage and freedom to act, to work for a peaceful and just world and a wholesome way of being human together.

Jesus sets the pace for this different world by calling us to be his friends, friends that he has chosen. Its one thing for us to chose our friends, but when others choose us as friends, its wonderfully affirming, uplifting and rewarding for us. Among your friends which ones did you choose and which ones chose you? Does the word “choose” apply to those you call your friends? Who reached out to the other first?

Jesus reaches out. God has reached out in Jesus. Jesus has chosen his friends, and when we believe and trust in him, it is a sign that we too are friends of Jesus, not submissive subjects of a awesome Lord, a rigidly judgmental God or a harsh demanding Master, but friends who share life and the paths of life together.

I found this illustration to be somewhat meaningful. Its told by Philip Yancy in his book called “What’s So Amazing About Grace?”

He writes:

“Not long ago I received in the mail a postcard from a friend that had on it only six words, “I am the one Jesus loves.” When I called him, he told me the slogan came from the author and speaker

Brennan Manning. At a seminar, Manning referred to Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, identified in the Gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'"

Manning also tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me."

In every way, the world is a treacherous place. It is also a needy place and threatened place.

Treacherous because, as we go about our daily lives, we are in constant danger of being entangled in the nets of the very powers that destroy life's goodness and complacently ignoring the dark influence those powers have over human life.

A needy place because there are so many victims of this dark influence – victims of violence, discrimination, inequality, injustice, racism, ideological extremism, institutionalized fear and ignorance that make up the vast impersonal handiwork of death.

A threatened and fragile place because the world that God holds in his hands is falling apart at the seams with crisis after crisis mounting toward a future that no longer will sustain human life as we know it now.

Against that reality, the only hope is our faith in the power of Jesus' friendship, Jesus' love for us and the power of that love to win a victory for the future of human life and a truly blessed world.