

“To Be Kind”
The Reverend Michael L. Delk
St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky
20th Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28C) – 12 & 13 November 2016
Isaiah 65:17-25; Luke 21:5-19

I think we all knew that no matter who won the election on Tuesday, we would all wake up on Wednesday morning in the Divided States of America, but that’s where we were living when we went to bed on Monday night, too. It’s where we’ve been living every evening and morning for the last several years, if not more. The election process merely brought this great divide into tighter focus. What had been simmering and bubbling on the stove for a long time finally boiled over: the mutual suspicion and fear, the fully reciprocated disrespect and hatred.

The sheer contempt between the candidates and fellow citizens has been disturbing, in part because we struggle to find in our history any precedent or even analog for what’s happened. Remember, though, especially as we celebrate our veterans, that our nation fought a rather nasty Civil War and somehow survived it and became better than before.

That gives us some perspective, but it’s not a panacea for the very real pain people feel – on all sides – when we look around and see to our shame that we aren’t living up to our name as the United States of America. Yes, there will always be differences, and those are healthy and necessary, but we’ve moved beyond difference to a stark division that seems to some irreconcilable.

What will the future hold? Nobody knows, except God. How can we bring healing and help repair the breach? We can’t without God. We claim citizenship in two kingdoms: one chiefly honors the Stars-and-Stripes, the other the cross of Christ. Both are good, but one is better, and while we rightly dwell in both at the same time, as Jesus taught us, “no man can serve two masters.” We must choose where our true loyalties lie, and then live up to that commitment.

When we choose the Kingdom of God as the realm of our principal citizenship, then we find hope in the power of God to bring about restoration and renewal and reconciliation.

Isaiah prophesied to a people who would have gladly traded their plight for an ugly election season. Conquered by the Babylonians, many of them captured and enslaved and taken into exile for seventy years, Israel suffered from her own internal divisions. Idolatry and injustice ran rampant. Many failed to see the danger, much less the problem, and among those could see a problem, no doubt severe disagreement raged about exactly what it was and who was to blame for it and how to fix it. Their social disintegration led inevitably to their fate. As the motto of our Commonwealth wisely proclaims, “United we stand, divided we fall.”

However, in the midst of this uncertainty and disorientation, Isaiah declared a message of redemption and release. God spoke through Isaiah, revealing, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.” At first, these words must have sounded incredible to people dislocated from one another, from their land, from their God, but if Israel had learned anything in its centuries-long relationship as a nation in covenant with God, they knew that God would be faithful and keep his promises.

Despite Israel’s failure to stay united, as God intended, He would not reject or abandon them, because nothing will deter God from achieving His purposes on this Earth, and God had chosen them to play the central role in bringing the whole world to glorify and worship Him. God fulfilled the oracle he delivered through the prophet Isaiah and allowed Israel to return home from exile. He brought their nation back from the edge of oblivion by literally putting them back together again.

Isaiah expresses the radical character of this holy reunion. “The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox.” That’s unnatural. Wolves eat lambs without compunction; in fact, with great joy. A lion sees an ox and thinks, “Dinner!” In this vision of a nation restored, God supernaturally transforms Israel and by extension the world into a place where there are no predators, no prey, no victims – only peace.

Of course, God’s oracle in Isaiah, though sited within a specific historical context, is properly understood as an apocalyptic text, a text with double-meaning that points both to Israel’s restoration and beyond it to a much grander renewal of creation yet to come, and that brings us to Jesus who, as chronicled in the Gospel of Luke, made his own apocalyptic predictions. They were infuriatingly vague.

Wars, rumors of war, famine, plague, earthquake, betrayal by those closest to you, odd celestial events, what we know today as comets and eclipses and meteor showers – all of these would indicate the time was drawing near, “but,” as Jesus said, “the end will not follow immediately.” Every generation has endured some if not all of the events Jesus cited as signs, and we’re still here waiting. Before those things would happen, though, Jesus predicted that his followers would be hated and would suffer persecution, and that’s been going on consistently for 2,000 years, and we’re still here waiting.

None of this undermines the promise that Jesus will return to restore creation to its original glory, as God intended, but if you worry that recent events serve as signs of the apocalypse, as some people do, and who knows maybe you’re right, I suggest that stranger things have happened. The Chicago Cubs won the World Series. That one should give us all cause for pause.

But how, then, can these apocalyptic predictions help us, if year after year and generation after generation, the signs appear and Jesus doesn't? Well, he is appearing, perhaps not in the cataclysmic way that someday will come, but in ways no less important. It's hard to see when the world seems to be in a chaos, but he's here, revealing the presence of God's love and peace to anyone willing to receive it. And that's what apocalypse is all about. The word itself, apocalypse, translates literally from the Greek as "revealing the concealed," and Jesus the crucified Messiah, the last thing anybody expected, reveals definitively who God is and what God wants and how God will achieve His purposes.

In other words, Jesus IS the Apocalypse. He embodies it. He will return in glory to judge, of that have no doubt, but in the meantime, far from absent or distant, Jesus remains fully present through the power of the Holy Spirit, revealing and working out God's purposes through us and through all people who keep the faith by pledging in word and deed their devoted loyalty to the Kingdom of God. Through us, if we let him, Jesus will exercise supernatural power to heal the divisions that threaten to shred our society.

I know that sounds incredible, but wolf and lamb, lion and ox, elephant and donkey can and will exist together in peace, through the power of the Risen Christ. Jesus will eventually get his way, so we might as well work for him rather than against him. If you really want to be on the winning side, it's not about candidates vying for power. It's about Christ, who already has it in unparalleled measure.

This is not meant to denigrate our political process or its importance, merely to put it in proper perspective. If you voted for President-Elect Trump, congratulations, you won a victory, but not THE victory. THE victory is Jesus for those who believe. If you voted for somebody

else, I'm sorry. You lost an election, but not everything. Jesus is EVERYTHING for those who believe.

But how do we translate our belief in Jesus into behavior that will help bring healing and repair the breach caused by our serious divisions? To answer this question, I would like to quote from the sermon preached by The Reverend Dr. Walter Eversley on the night Bishop Wimberly ordained me to the priesthood, nearly 19 years ago. At the end of an ordination sermon, the soon-to-be priest traditionally receives a personal charge from the preacher, and here is the final portion of it.

“The younger William James, about to leave home, turned to his uncle, famous philosopher and psychologist with these words, ‘What advice do you have to give me now that I am leaving home?’ The older man replied, ‘Three things you must take with you. The first is this – ‘be kind.’ With bated breath, he waited through a pause which seemed so long. Impatiently, he urged, ‘What is the second, uncle?’ ‘The second is this – be kind!’ Suspecting what the third might be he waited silently until the old man said, ‘The third is this – be kind!’

“You ought to aspire to holiness,” Walter told me. “Remember, however, kindness is next to holiness, and while you are striving for holiness, you can at least be kind.”

For these troubled times, that may seem to some like a uselessly simplistic answer to the question I posed, but Walter's words have nurtured and guided me through distress and delight, victory and defeat, and I hope his simple yet profound wisdom will give you the same. Amen.