

Perceiving the Kingdom

Fr John Ryder's address to the Ladies Group - St John's Church, Gosport 17th October 2006



Fingers, healthy, well looked after fingers, if they have never had to do hard manual work, will be soft, and easily hurt, and will recoil from the slightest prick.

Those same fingers, once accustomed to rough, hard work, will not only become calloused and therefore not be so sensitive, they will not even recoil when a thorn penetrates the calloused skin.

If those fingers are then provided with gloves, and with cream and patience they can soften and shed the calloused skin, and they will become as soft and as sensitive again. The one permanent change will be that they will remain far more willing to tolerate pain.

The trouble with humanity is that our souls have become calloused, and we have not noticed it.

What we don't want to see about the way we are hurting God's creation, we try not to see, or even deliberately do not see, and when we are forced to, we do not respond. And a lot of the pain we don't even notice when it is staring us in the face.

Global warming is something we all need to worry about. We should be doing everything we can to reduce our carbon footprint - for example by what transport we use, and by how we heat and insulate our homes. But it doesn't stop there. We should not buy food from the other side of the world when it can be avoided - because of the carbon emissions of transporting it, as well as the fact that the people there are probably more in need of that food than we are. And so we need to become more and more aware, not only of the amount of fuel we use, but the amount we get others to use on our behalf, and we need to change our lifestyle accordingly.

Or think about our water supply. Not that long ago one would happily drink from any running water, from any stream or river. Now one might die from it.

As one peels off the calloused skin, and rubs the cream into our souls, we become more able to see, and more willing to look at the harm we are causing, and as we feel the pain, we become more willing to do something about it.

Which is the work of the Holy Spirit. To convict us of our sin, and to help us to overcome it.

Pollution wasn't really a serious issue for pre-industrial man, so there are not many examples in the Bible, but there are principles. Such as that God made the world, and saw that it was good. This has nothing to do with whether we think the world was made in 6 days or in 6 thousand billion years; it has everything to do with who made it, and why, with who made us, and why. Genesis records God made us stewards of his good creation: stewards to look after, to cultivate and improve the rest of creation: not to destroy it.

So in perceiving God's Kingdom, we need to perceive a world that is good, and in harmony; we need the Holy Spirit to enable us to see every way in which God intended that to be; we need the Holy Spirit to enable us to see how we have departed from it, and how God calls us to get back to live as he intended. Car use, the food and clothes you buy and how you heat your home has as much to do with leading a holy life as matrimonial fidelity and the ending of slavery.

The re-sensitising of our souls might start with feeling the prick when we see someone - or are tempted ourselves - to take the car 2 blocks to get a pint of milk, or to have the heating so high that we can wear summer clothes even in the middle of winter. It needs to progress until we feel pain when we see a plastic container discarded on the roadside, so that it hurts if we are forced to buy food that could be, but isn't locally produced, organic and with packaging that we can completely recycle, until we refuse to buy clothes made in sweatshops on the other side of the world.

But let us take a break and listen to what the kingdom should be like:

The Prophet Isaiah

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him--the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD--and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with

the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash round his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.

"They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."

Can you imagine a world like that?

And think, when that becomes true, what will they eat? The humans, I mean. Again Genesis comes to our aid. We read the 5th day of creation:

And God said, "Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: livestock, creatures that move along the ground, and wild animals, each according to its kind." And it was so. God made the wild animals according to their kinds, the livestock according to their kinds, and all the creatures that move along the ground according to their kinds. And God saw that it was good.

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground--everything that has the breath of life in it--I give every green plant for food." And it was so.

"Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."

I know what I am about to say is going to be unpopular to many, but please listen, and suspend judgement until I have finished, or perhaps even until I have answered your questions at the end.

Originally, and ultimately, our God-given diet is not vegetarian, or even vegan, but fruitarian. No killing means plants too.

The immediate objection that springs to the mind of a Christian is 'But what about Jesus?'

I do not think the Gospel records show any problem with what I have just said, although they may seem to do so now. We can - we must - get to that later. Now, we need to start at the beginning.

And the beginning is Genesis. If we are to take scripture seriously, then the essential revelation of God to mankind over centuries - millennia perhaps, up until it was finally written down in this form after the Jewish conquest of Canaan, is condensed in that book. Not as history, but as mind-numbing theology in understandable story form.

And in God's first covenant with man, in the world's primeval innocence, there was to be no killing, not even of plants, for any reason whatsoever.

But that, as we all know, didn't last long.

Things got so bad God drowned most of the human race. In the Covenant he made with the survivors he had this to say:

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an

accounting for the life of his fellow man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.

Thus God allows the eating of meat not because he has changed his mind about what is right - God never changes - but because of the sin of man. For this same reason divorce was allowed, because of the hardness of man's heart. Neither were so in the beginning, and neither will be in the end.

So the eating of meat was allowed in God's covenant with Noah, but only if it was done in the most compassionate way possible - which in those days was to drain the blood from the animal, with a sharp knife with a smooth blade. Other cultures of the time would cut the meat off without killing the animal first - either unthinkingly or to keep the meat fresh - but God insists that with the concession to eat meat must go compassion for all of creation - and a strict system of justice against the killing of man.

Which, along with the later prohibition of pork, gives us the clue for this concession. It used to be thought that pork was banned for health reasons, as before modern refrigeration it went 'off' too quickly. Not so, says rabbinical research.

Men could not cope with being good. So a distinction had to be made, in a world which had become totally depraved, between taking the life, and the eating of a fellow human or the killing and eating of another animal. The meat of an animal was allowed after the flood, to stress the distinction, the horror of killing and eating one's fellow humans, and not because it was right in itself.

You may recall the plane crash in the Andes, where the crash survivors only survived the wait for rescue by eating the flesh of their fellow passengers who had died. And how some of them said they later craved for the taste of human flesh again.

Which is the reason why pork is so popular. It closely resembles human flesh in appearance, taste and texture. In those times to be able to prevent, and police the horror of cannibalism, pork needed to be banned too.

I, along with many other religious leaders do not think it was wrong for those Andes survivors to have eaten human flesh, as there was nothing else, and the people were already dead.

It would always be wrong to kill a human for food, as I hope you will all agree it is always wrong to kill an animal in anything but the most compassionate way possible.

Which not only rules out things like pate de foie gras, but all factory farmed animals, battery cage eggs, the normal commercial milk.

This is sin, as described in God's covenant with Noah, which is his covenant with the entire human race. That means you and me.

Neither we, nor the farming community could survive a sudden switch of the entire population to a freedom-farmed or vegan diet, but as Christians we should be working towards it continuously.

And as the callouses of our soul get peeled away, and we become prepared to actually face what we are doing, we will not want to eat any meat, then milk, until even the thought of killing a plant causes us pain.

Firstly, and most importantly, because it is against the will of the God who created us, and who loves all his creation, not just the humans; and, as Isaiah shows, if we are aiming for heaven, we will need to get used to it.

Secondly, that we may both be willing to confront any horror that man is causing, and remain soft-hearted. God so often criticised his chosen people for being 'hard of heart'. We must not be so, we must be willing to share the pain of every living being who - or that - feels it.

And thirdly, because vegetarian food is so much more environmentally friendly. The deforestation of the Amazon is to provide meat. A vegetarian diet needs far less acreage of land and far less water than a carnivorous one, a vegan diet even less, and a fruitarian one even less. And as more people are adopting our highly carnivorous western ways, we are fast running out of both land and water.

Another consideration is that most agrochemicals are used, first to grow food for animals destined to be eaten, and then to promote their growth and keep them alive in unnatural conditions. And all these things in the end find their way back into the water we drink, and the air we breathe. The air in rural Isle of Wight now contains more pollutants than central London. In Victorian times people with chest infections used to go there to get better. Now the resident population has one of the highest rates of asthma in the country.

Vegetarians, and more so vegans, are also far less likely to suffer from a range of degenerative diseases such as cancer, which I think has a lot to say about following our maker's instructions.

So for the sake of the planet, as well as ourselves and our fellow creatures, a drastic change in diet is necessary. But this is not something most people can do suddenly. Especially not if they have to persuade their family. Many might never fully achieve it. But each step taken in the right direction, never mind how small, not only helps save the planet, it helps remove a callous from your soul, it helps you to see and feel God's love in everything, and for everything. Many a Jew will tell you the same.

You may say, "But this is all Old Testament stuff!" But remember the words of the Lord Jesus: *"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished."*

And for those who follow Christ, there is greater and greater agreement. For someone in the Anglo-Catholic tradition like myself I am delighted that both John Paul 2 and Benedict have come out so strongly in support of universal compassion, asserting that animals too have souls. More difficult to acknowledge is that the 7th Day Adventists beat us to it by over a century - they have much to teach us about obedience to Scripture, and God's love for all of creation.

And if I can put in a quick commercial for my home country: Fry's vegan sausages and polony is delicious, of far higher protein content than meat, and is produced by a 7th Day Adventist factory in South Africa to help Christians switch to a more biblical diet - often without their guests or the rest of the family knowing.

But in all areas of our day-to-day life: fuel consumption, diet, lifestyle, recycling - whatever we consume, however we relate to the rest of God's creation - if we see the world as God sees it - as described by Genesis and Isaiah for example - we should feel pain at any damage done to this thing of wonder and beauty which God has given us as our home - and so our striving should not just be to lessen our environmental footprint, but at minimum to neutralise it - and where we can to restore the damage we have done in the past, and the damage other people have done, and are doing.

For its not just a matter of somehow paying for what we have done. We have been forgiven anyway. It is that the love we have received from God our Father demands that we go further, and do what we can not to harm, and where we can to heal the earth which He loves so much, and which he asks us to love and care for.

God's love for us is the only effective balm that cures everything, even death. What we can buy or otherwise pay for can have very little effect. Remembering this, one can then share his pain on the suffering of creation, especially the suffering caused by the selfishness and blindness of man, so that one joins from the heart with the words of St John the Divine: *"Come, Lord Jesus, come!"*

But what difference can you as an individual make? It is an effort to change, and the forces of evil encourage us to think that what we can do won't make any difference. But God made us in his image, and if what we can do cannot make a difference, then the cross of Christ in restoring that image in us, and the sending to us of the Holy Spirit have been in vain. We have been privileged to be made God's co-creators. Time is running short. We must be missionary. I think one of the failures of mission in the first world is that we have described sin - and God's love - far too narrowly. Both are as relevant to every aspect of modern life as they are to our inner spiritual life, and as they were to the people of 2000 years ago.

We must soften the callouses on our hearts, and open them to the love of God, and both the pain, and the joy which that brings.

I had thought of ending my talk there. But as I am sure it will be asked - in a Christian group it should be asked: What would Jesus do?

First we know he would be absolutely obedient to the law, and would point out the modern hypocrisies that try to evade the law for profit or comfort, and which thus damage their fellow creatures - human or otherwise - as he did before. And because he did this the rich and the powerful would again try to kill him.

We can be sure he wouldn't worry about the social status of the transport he used, and would look rather at what was the best for the community, and for the environment as a whole.

He would probably wear second-hand clothes, and use an extra jumper or a rug rather than turn the heating up in winter.

I am sure that he wouldn't drop litter. Or use nasty chemicals

And eat?

There are those, with far better knowledge of Greek and Aramaic than myself that insist the New Testament is perfectly consistent with Jesus following a vegan diet. But it doesn't too much worry me if it isn't.

Because I know that following the law, he would refuse to eat that which was produced in a way that damaged creation, or which showed any form of cruelty whatsoever, if for no other reason than that he would not break any of his Father's covenants with man.

He would know that a diet of predominantly animal protein is not sustainable for all, and he would not put himself above others; he never did.

And like in the matter of divorce, he would want to go beyond the law, back to the way things were in the beginning, and so that when a vegetarian, then a vegan, then a fruitarian diet became available, that is what he would eat. And, as always, he would remain a step or three ahead of us. In obedience. In self-sacrifice. And in love. No matter what it cost.