

December 17, 2023
Third Sunday of Advent

MEDITATION:

Well, UNFCCC 28 – the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, better known as the Conference of the Parties, or COP for short, is over. As much as there was disagreement, watering down of goals, shortcomings in enforcing change, and all of the other weaknesses, there was one significant outcome. The United States of America, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia all agreed on something, and the something is that the world needs to transition away from the use of fossil fuels as a means of energy. Many will say that it was not enough, or fast enough to limit the increase in global temperatures to 1.5 degrees Celsius, and it is a first in terms of getting everyone to agree that the burning of fossil fuels must end. Globally, we need to transition to a new energy source to power manufacturing, transportation, heating and cooling our homes and workplaces, and running all of our electronics.

In Jesus' day, Israel was also interested in a significant transition. They wanted to transition from Roman occupation to self-determination as a free and independent nation. There was no justice for the vast majority of the citizens of Israel. Power was wielded by the Romans, and the top few percent of Israelis: people like the Chief Priest and the Sanhedrin. A few more percent also enjoyed financial security: some wealthy landowners, merchants, and the temple priests. The rest of the population were at constant risk of financial disaster, and perhaps having to sell their land, or even themselves and their families into slavery, just to eat. The justice that was missing wasn't the justice that is meted out by a judge in a courtroom, but the justice in which everyone has what they need to live a life of dignity – distributive justice – also known as righteousness.

There were different groups of people in Jesus' day who had different ideas about how transition might come about. The Zealots were an insurgent group. They meant to overthrow the king – Herod Antipas – and the Romans by violence. In place of Herod, they would set up their own king.

John, the baptizer, also wanted to transition away from Roman occupation and the brutal and unjust rule of Herod. The difference was that John didn't want to use violent force.... John wanted to force God's hand into intervening in human matters and directly changing things..... into establishing the kingdom of God on earth, as in heaven. John's plan was to have all of the sinners in Israel – everyone – cross the Jordan out of the promised land, and then cross back into the promised land the way their ancestors had a thousand years earlier under Joshua's leadership, and on their way across the river, John would baptise them with a baptism of repentance of sin. John was sure that if enough Israelites were baptised and crossed back into the promised land, that God would have to act to bring about justice. God would have to send the Messiah. And it was the Messiah that John was pointing to in his ministry.

There is a big difference between those two plans. One requires people to actively participate in making change happen – through violent means. The other makes change the responsibility of God – it is God who will change the situation.

This is the environment that Jesus comes to operate in. Only Jesus changes things up. Jesus is demanding that people act to change the current reality, but that they do it not through violent means, but through love. Where John puts change in God's hands, making people not responsible for change, Jesus puts change in the hands of the people, making them directly responsible for change. Where the Zealots sought change through the use of force and violence, Jesus sought change through the use of a far more powerful means, through love.

In a way, it was like John was running a monopoly down at the river, and those being baptised were his clients, while Jesus was calling people not to be clients, but to be franchisees. Jesus wanted everyone to be responsible for loving themselves, and their neighbours, and the people they found it difficult to love, and even for loving their enemies.

In a way, if freedom and independence from Roman occupation had been accomplished either through the use of force, or through an act of God, most people would have been happy. But it would, in all likelihood, have been merely an external change, for, very likely, the injustice most people experienced would have continued, only it would have been injustice perpetrated by their own leaders.

However, if freedom had been accomplished through the use of love, Roman occupation would have ceased to be the over-riding issue. What would have changed would have been the perspective of the people. In loving themselves, and in loving their neighbours, and in loving their enemies, they would have arrived at inner peace, and it is that inner peace that is the precursor of joy.

Jesus came, Jesus is coming again, Jesus is with us now, to show us that joy is within our grasp. But joy depends on peace, and peace depends on justice, and justice depends on love. May love be your M.O., for it will cause you to act justly and with righteousness, and justice will lead to true peace, including inner peace, and peace is where you will discover joy.