

# The Promised Land

God's Plan to Renew All Things

## Moving to the Promised Land

You may think a book with the title *Promised Land* would dive straight into a discussion on the modern state of Israel. In a way this book is about that, but it's also about our Western nations and how we have occupied land in the past and seek to dominate world markets today. We have all viewed the world through the spectrum of competition, overcoming other people and cultures and exploiting our environment to obtain first position in our land and wider world - but does this tally with the teachings of Jesus?

When we look at *Promise Land* through the spectrum of Jesus' teachings we see something very different. Jesus spoke about loving our neighbour, the enemy, those different to us, those of others races and faiths. He spoke about us seeing the log in our eye, caring for those who seek to harm us and making peace with the enemy. This was all in the context of Israel trying to inherit their land against a brutal Roman occupation. Very few people understood what Jesus was teaching: the way in which we all journey together to inherit God's *Promised Land* in the entire world. Jesus was going far beyond describing a small parcel of land for one race, but a fully renewed entire world for all who love God from the heart, and whose works towards their neighbour and enemy show it.

This book also addresses our view of the world in general. Do we see the gospel as primarily personal, about spiritual issues, about going to heaven? If that is so we might think there is no long term value in this world. God is going to one day throw it away, we believe. And if God isn't going to renew our nations in this current age, to turn them all into his *Promised Land* through the gospel, then we can largely ignore them and the suffering and get on with our own lives. By the time we add into this theology the *end-times* scenarios that circulate, we adopt a very dangerous and cheap way of looking at the suffering of others: people who are meant to be seen as our neighbours, people we are meant to be serving.

For several years we have worked in one of the most hostile places on earth. We have seen God do wonders in turning many people to Christ. We have seen great hope expressed through the gospel message of reconciliation in the midst of great suffering. We have worked with wonderful teams and with Christians who have served others with complete dedication in the midst of great danger. We have seen Muslims give their lives to protect Christians. We have seen walls go up, communities divided along religious or racial lines, victims of a false narrative, which is spread by powerful interest groups trying to dominate a region.

We must come to a view of the world that isn't based on fighting for land, but is based on the life and teachings of Jesus. If we don't show Christ in this way our gospel is

without credibility and our witness in changing the world is emasculated. Our call in this world is to reconcile, to bring down walls and to build community. This, we believe, is one of the greatest needs we face globally today. In many ways the world is on a precipice caused by mistrust and broken relationships. We need a completely fresh gospel understanding to reshape our views and refashion our life styles, and which is strong enough to keep us in Christ's footsteps no matter the injustice we face. As a church we need a complete reorientation in how we see our role in the world, expressed through service rather than dominion, as part of God's New Earth promise. In the following chapters we discuss the gospel in the following terms:

1. God has an eternal purpose for this earth, which he is bringing to pass in our current church age.
2. God's purpose is to fulfill this plan through humanity, to rule his creation, redeemed and renewed in the Second Adam.
3. This rule is expressed and accomplished through service, through the cross; following the way Christ modeled in his humble Incarnation, through which God reached out to and reconciled his enemies. (Luke 22:25-26, Philippians 2:1-11)

## Renewing Our Focus

Three wrong ideas we have often bought into in recent times are that:

1. The gospel is primarily about ourselves as individuals
2. The gospel is primarily about us going to heaven
3. The gospel is more or less about faith without works.

Taken together, these ideas prompted us increasingly to live a “faith” that is about enjoying ourselves, rather than being engaged in God’s will and plan for the suffering world in which we live.

If we take the call of Abraham as a foundation for the gospel, then we see it is about community. God promises to raise up a global family from Abraham, from all the nations and peoples of the earth. God’s purpose is about this family. It is not merely about our “personal relationship with God.”

And if we take the Hebrew worldview as our backdrop for the gospel, we see it is holistic. It isn’t only a spiritual one. It starts with our inner man healed and restored through Christ, but it impacts the world in which we live. The gospel to the Hebrews was decidedly about their whole lives, especially about renewing the land, their communities. They weren’t focused on going to heaven. They were thinking about God’s promises: his kingdom coming and will being done on earth.

And thirdly, the idea that faith has nothing to do with good works further isolates us from our neighbor and from a world in need. God's purpose is the opposite. We are saved without the ritual works of the law, but believing without the result of increasing in good works towards others is not biblical, holistic faith.

These points make up much of the message of Jesus. He spoke about relationships in his new community and our impact upon the world. He spoke about the kingdom coming, not in the violent way it was supposed in his time, but by caring and serving. And he spoke about works, and said these good works define his new people and demonstrate resurrection life in this world. His message was about the land we live in, showing how communities are healed and renewed. If there is one message Christians need to show forth in the world today, it is this.

## The Theme of Scripture

A quick overview of the scripture shows the importance of land, our present communities and this world to God's heart and eternal plan. We see that God's plan isn't to dispense with this earth after we are saved. We don't mean to play heaven and earth off against each other, to take one and not the other. God's plan is always that we take both. His plan in Christ is to merge heaven and earth together in one holistic and God filled creation. Below we look at God's consistent plan in scripture, seen in creation, in Israel, and in the re-creation through Christ. This shows God has a plan for us in this world and why the church is here.

Genesis starts with creation, with order created out of chaos. Adam and Eve were priests, called to reflect God's image (his nature and character) throughout the world. They were to have "dominion". It's in Jesus that we see what this dominion means. In Philippians 2, Jesus overcame and ruled through servant hood, for the common good, for the good of others. This is God's character. Adam and Eve were given land, represented by the Garden and the world around them. God's plan was to inhabit his good land, his whole creation, along with his people, sustaining blessed community.

This temple or habitation of God with his creation is the poetic theme in Genesis. Hebrew literature has historical and poetic threads, both teaching about God's character and purpose. The first five books of the Old Testament handed

down by Moses reflect this poetic structure, both in sections like Genesis, and in their whole. The Pentateuch closes in Deuteronomy reflecting the way it opened in Genesis, with a new creation. This time a new priesthood is created by the Passover. They are brought out of chaos in Egypt and given a Garden, the Promised Land, from which they are to be a witness to the nations. Israel would not have missed this message of their Adamic calling. Deuteronomy then wonderfully closes anticipating the last creation/temple that would come from Israel after they fell: the new eternal circumcision in Christ. (Deuteronomy 30:6)

This temple theme is then picked up by Jesus of Nazareth. He is the new temple of God: “Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again.” (John 2:19) He appeared as the very image of God and in him the fullness of the godhead dwelt. (Colossians 2:9) He was heaven come down to earth. In Christ, God is dwelling and tabernacling among us, so we can see his image and glory. (John 1:14) Again, God’s purpose is to renew his creation by his temple presence.

Through Christ, God’s presence is passed on to the whole church. We take up this Adamic commission, foreshadowed by Israel, and together we are his new temple renewing the nations: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may show the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9) So God’s renewal plan goes on

through the church, through his temple now in every nation, until the close of this age, when he comes.

And when he comes, he comes with the whole authority of heaven, to unite heaven and earth together in one healed temple/dwelling for God and his people. This is how the scripture closes at the end of Revelation, just as it opened in Genesis. The theme of scripture is fulfilled; God now dwells with his creation in wholeness. Heaven comes down to earth, the nations are renewed and the land fully healed.

In Western theology, in our personal lives and churches, much has been made of our individual justification as the main theme of scripture. But we see in the above sketch that reflecting the image of God is his plan. Our individual justification is a stepping stone to God's call for us. His plan is for his community to reflect his image and likeness, to imitate his character and behaviour within the nations of the world. Image bearers, being God's "selfie" in the world, is God's main purpose in the gospel, and the way God renews the whole world:

"For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed... the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God." Romans 8:19-21

This global renewal is why Jesus came and it is hindered so long as we think God hates part of his creation, whether the

world as a whole or those we consider to be our enemies. When we read about the world perishing, in the Hebrew mind it means the world is “changed”. God isn’t discarding the earth, but he is filling it with his glory and fullness. (Psalm 102: 25-27, Isaiah 6:3, 13:9-10, 34:1-4, Mark 13:31, Ephesians 1:23) The Hebrew did not see these texts as a destruction of earth, but the changing of a regime, or transformation of the world. This is how we read Hebrews 1:10-12 or 2 Peter 3:1-14, which apply to the end of Old Covenant Jerusalem, and as a shadow to the renewing of the old sinful world.

When we read these texts in the Greek mindset, where the material creation is considered evil, we believe the earth will be finally destroyed, or not fully delivered from its corruption. This eradicates a large portion of the gospel message. We then don’t value the world or see Jesus’ teachings as related to our communities bringing the renewal he came for. Western culture has inherited this non-Hebrew, non-holistic thinking, which is part of the reason for our individualism, setting ourselves apart from the world and its suffering today: “The gospel is about our individual salvation to heaven, not about this world, which he going to throw away.”

## A Theology of Land

The “gospel” God preached to Israel was about their life in the land God gave to them. They needed to observe the right life style, to be in right relationship with God and with others, but the benefit of this would be good community and wholesome lives in the land in which they lived. It was a spiritual gospel of grace; they would have God’s presence among them. It was a gospel about their communities; it was for their nation and families as a whole, not just for the individual. It was for their land; God promised their land would flourish and be in peace.

Israel saw that the promises of God were about their life in their land. Look through the promises to Israel in the Old Testament: they always related to their land. Sometimes we have said that God changed this in the New Covenant, to spiritualise the gospel and change its focus towards heaven. We have a greater opening of heaven to us in the New Covenant, but God hasn’t done away with this Hebrew vision of the gospel. This issue of land and the gospel is an area where there has been much confusion, but Jesus’ teachings bring clarity to God’s purpose. We see in particular a vision of possessing land through service which brings healing, rather than through force.

God brought Israel into the Promised Land. The way they took the land isn’t a picture for us to copy in the gospel today, for Christ’s is a different kingdom to this. David, for

example, wasn't allowed to build God's house for he was a man of war. God said he would raise up his seed who would be a man of peace to build his house. (1 Chronicles 22:8-10) This is about Jesus, the Prince of Peace, and his global kingdom. It isn't to be built by those old human ways.

But there is a lot in what God taught Israel then that reflects in his ongoing purpose today. The land wasn't Israel's land, but it belonged to God. (Leviticus 18:25, 28, 25:23, 27:30, Psalm 24:1) Israel didn't have a right of their own to the land; they would keep it only by learning to imitate God, eventually bringing renewal to their cultures. God required them to reflect his nature in how they treated their neighbour. He would not tolerate continual sin and oppression of others. God said that if Israel didn't follow God's law then the land would vomit them out of it.

This gives God and his entire world/land a dignity that our Western culture often denies in its commercialism. Land is to be respected as we possess it. The people, foreigners or the feeble that inhabit the land are to be cared for. We aren't the landlords, but guests in God's world by his gift. We are gifted with the land by grace, therefore we are to show grace to others. That's a summary of God's law to Israel when he brought them out of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:9, Leviticus 19:34)

The *shema* (Hebrew for *hear and do*) summarizes how Israel would keep the land and how the land and their communities

would flourish. “Hear and do O Israel. The Lord your God is one Lord. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind ... and you shall love your neighbour as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18, Deuteronomy 6:4-5, 32:47, Mark 12:30-31) The law goes on to show how Israel should treat their neighbours, the foreigners, the poor and those in need, lifting their burdens. This is God’s character, the God of the Exodus, who delivered Israel from their oppression. They shall follow this God and deliver their neighbour, or the land would not retain them.

The prophets of the Old Testament reiterated this law. Isaiah, for example:

“If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday. The Lord will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail. Your people will rebuild the ancient ruins and will raise up the age-old foundations; you will be called Repairer of Broken Walls, Restorer of Streets with Dwellings.” Isaiah 58:9b-12

This isn’t just a “spiritual gospel”. It is speaking in the usual Israeli understanding about our land. Israel would restore and fulfill the Adamic commission by bringing God’s nature

to community and to nations. Isaiah as a whole is about how the kingdom of Christ, reigning from our hearts, will renew our entire land, not just the Old Testament land, but the world, as his kingdom extends from sea to sea. The vision of Isaiah is of righteousness being done, by which the whole community and land are healed.

In the New Testament this purpose of the law is fulfilled in us who walk by his Spirit. In us the love of God (meaning love *for* God) is poured out into our hearts so that we may fulfill the purpose of the law in our relationships and communities. God fulfills Old Testament *shema* in us through his Spirit. (Romans 5:5, 8:4) The New Covenant isn't an abrogation of the purposes of the Old Covenant, but it is God's solution to our inability under the law. In intervening in our lives by his Son and by Spirit, God's plan is that we love one another and love our enemies as Christ taught. The intention isn't to set aside the Old Covenant purposes, but to enable them, to fulfill God's plan for the world.

## The Promised Land

Made in God's image, Adam and Eve were equipped for their glorious commission, to bear God's kingdom rule on earth. Psalm 8 depicts this: "What is man that you are mindful of him?... you have crowned him with glory and honour and set him over all the works of your hands." We see here, as we will also see below in Romans, that "glory and honour" are related to our commission to rule God's creation, and this commission is still God's purpose. This is a Messianic Psalm, showing that what Adam and Eve lost, is being restored through Christ.

This theme continues through all the Psalms. David's kingdom over Israel is depicted as a shadow of Christ's rule over all creation. "He shall rule from sea to sea, from the river the ends of the earth." (Psalm 72:8) "Ask of me and I will give you the nations for your inheritance and the ends of the earth for your possession." (Psalm 2:8) Rule over the earth is the Messiah's inheritance, and also our inheritance in him. We have often thought that going to heaven is our final inheritance, but the promises to the Hebrew show our inheritance in Messiah is to rule the world. This is not a rule of supremacy, but through obedience, self-giving and service, like Christ modeled for us.

Christ's rule is shown to begin in heaven after his death, resurrection and ascension. "They pierced my hands and feet... All the ends of the earth shall turn to the Lord... he is

ruler over all the nations. ” (Psalm 22:16, 27) “Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.” (Psalm 110:1) These enemies are not people, but sin, sorrow and death, things common to us all. These enemies are overcome with a different type of armour: truth, faith, mercy, suffering, not with violence. Evil is overcome with good. (Matthew 5, Ephesians 6:10-20, Romans 12:21, 1 Peter 2:20)

The scriptures show Christ’s return after his enemies are subjected through the gospel. (1 Corinthians 15:25-26, Acts 3:21) This is what the Great Commission is for, “All power in heaven and on earth is given to me... Go therefore to all nations, teaching them to observe all things I have commanded you.” Christ reconciled all things on his cross and now the Holy Spirit is bringing about their renewal:

“To reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Colossians 1:20

This “reconciling all things in heaven and on earth” means to bring heaven and earth together in peace through his blood. He is not destroying earth, but renewing it by uniting earth with his heavenly kingdom, firstly through his church and finally through his coming: uniting the new heaven (meaning a heaven to which we are now reconciled) fully to the new transformed earth. (Revelation 21)

“With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.” (Ephesians 1:8b-10)

In Romans Paul speaks of man’s sin in the context of his stewardship over creation. Instead of ruling, man bows under creation and worships created things in the form of idols. (Romans 1:21-25) “All have sinned and fallen from short of God’s glory”, meaning we are no longer fit to rule with God. (Romans 3:23) Paul describes how this creation will be restored, first by restoring man through Christ. Paul’s gospel isn’t only the forgiveness of sins, nor is it only being reconciled in personal relationship with God, but also restoring man to glory to rule over God’s creation, “to reign in life through Messiah Jesus”. (Romans 5:17) Paul links us to Messiah’s reign over the world in the Psalms. Christ as the Second Man restores Adam’s commission and renews all things.

Paul follows Isaiah describing the extent of this renewal, which is not limited to the Old Testament land boundaries. That land was a shadow of the entire world Christ would reconcile on his cross. Isaiah proclaims God has “increased the nation and increased the land” (Isaiah 9:3, 33:17, 49:20, 54:1-3). The seed of Israel through Christ becomes too many as he inherits the earth. As the kingdom and new temple spread through the world, all land becomes his Holy Land:

“The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of his Lord and of His Christ.” (Revelation 11:15)

“You have enlarged the nation, Lord; you have enlarged the nation. You have gained glory for yourself; you have extended all the borders of the land.” Isaiah 26:15

So Paul claims Abraham’s inheritance is the whole world (Romans 4:13), and explains this by revealing Christ’s work in terms of Israel’s Exodus history. In Romans 6 we are set free from bondage in Egypt, by being baptized through the Red Sea. In Romans 7 we come to Mount Sinai, to the law. In Romans 8, instead of going back to bondage, to Egypt, we go on to our inheritance as sons, to our expanded land, culminating in the renewal of all nations and the entire cosmos, as God transforms and delivers it from its former corruption and mortality. (Romans 8:18-21)

This shows us that the gospel is about our land, just as much as the Old Testament promises were. It shows us that when Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God and of heaven, he was proclaiming this coming of heaven to earth, in which our lives, communities and nations would be renewed. This is how we see Jesus’ teachings, as related to the Old Testament promises and his call to us to be his new community in our present world. In the gospel, all the promises made to Israel about land and rule are fulfilled, rather than set aside or merely spiritualized.

## Jesus' Land Teaching

Our view of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels is often that Jesus was largely speaking about how we go to heaven. He was proclaiming his messiahship, but we often haven't related his teachings to his kingdom message, in which he has come to renew the world through his church. Instead we have often assumed certain end-times theories that have put Jesus' teachings off to some other day. Jesus said to Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world", meaning its power, values, and methods are completely different to the way the fallen world and its powers work. (John 18:36)

When we see Jesus' message in the context of his time we find he wasn't focusing only on heaven. In John 14 Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for his disciples and would return to them, so they would be with him and his Father forever. Jesus was preparing a place for them in the Father's family by his death and resurrection. He would rise and return to them. He would also come to them in his Spirit at Pentecost. He would also return to us in his final coming when he renews all things. But if we die before that time we go to heaven to be with him and await his return. This passage is about his new temple, God's Spirit returning to his people through the Messiah.

God had promised he would return the Jews to their land and he would *come again* to his temple. He did bring them back from Babylon, but his glory had not yet returned to his

temple. They knew that when God came again to his temple Israel would then renew the world. They were still waiting for this return when Jesus began his ministry. Ezekiel is about God leaving the old temple (*ichabod*) and God's *shekinah*, Spirit and glory returning to his new temple, to renew the world. (Isaiah 49:6, Ezekiel 10:18, 37:26, 47, John 7:37-39, 17:22, Acts 15:16-17) The Jews didn't understand this would happen through Jesus' cross and resurrection and return of the Holy Spirit to his new temple. It is this return/fulfillment that Jesus is proclaiming in John 14, that God was returning to the Jews in his Son, his Spirit and his kingdom as he promised.

We have often not heard Jesus speaking in his Hebrew setting. What was going on in this first century when Jesus appeared? What was he saying to the people in that generation? The Jews were under occupation to Rome. One of the books that loomed upmost in their imagination and expectations was Daniel. Daniel spoke of the overthrow of Israel's enemies and of the coming of the kingdom of God. He didn't speak of God's people going to heaven, but the kingdom coming to earth and then filling the whole world. Jesus was speaking into this expectation:

"But the rock (kingdom of God) that struck the statue (God's enemies) became a huge mountain and filled the whole earth." Daniel 2:35b

Daniel had also told Israel when this event would occur. He said in 70 x 7, which was thought then to be 490 years. (Daniel 9:24) When we look at the writings of the Jews in the first century when Jesus came, we see that many Jews were expecting the kingdom of God/heaven to come in that generation. They calculated that the 490 years from Daniel's time would be fulfilled roughly in their day. Jesus didn't deny this. His message began with, "The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Mark 1:15) The content of Daniel's message is fulfilled in Jesus' teaching.

The Jews were expecting God's kingdom to come, to fulfill his promises about putting things right in the world. They mainly assumed this would happen through violence. They wondered who this promised Son of Man/Messiah figure in Daniel would be. Jesus didn't fit the expectation. His message and actions disappointed them. They generally didn't understand the kingdom he proclaimed. Jesus wasn't overthrowing the worldly powers, but his kingdom was growing in a different way. The main content of Jesus' teachings was how his kingdom would go about renewing the nations through his new community, in fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies.

Daniel spoke about the Messiah ascending to rule at God's right hand.

"In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He

approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” Daniel 7:13-14

This is what the disciples thought of when they heard of the Son of Man “coming on the clouds”. It was his resurrection and ascension to power. (Psalm 110:1, Hebrews 1:3) The clouds represented heavenly authority. His rule would be over the earth and all its nations and people, and his saints would rule with him. (Daniel 7:27) Daniel spoke of the resurrection. Some would enter the eternal kingdom and others would be raised to everlasting shame and contempt. (Daniel 12:2) So the question of the Jews was, “Who would God’s people be, raised to rule over earth?” They didn’t see the resurrection as a resurrection to heaven, but a transformed incorruptible bodily fit to rule the earth, fulfilling God’s promises about land. They assumed these people would be the Jews, not just any Jews, but those who were zealous for Torah. Those in the resurrection of shame would be the non-Jews, their enemies, the pagans.

So a lot of Jesus’ teaching was addressed to this question. His answer shocked his hearers. The true Jew was not determined by ritual works of Torah, but by good works, and inwardly, from what came out of the heart. (Matt 15:17-18) In this case the neighbourly Samaritan was a “Jew”, one who

knew God and did his will. The enemies of God, symbolically known then as Gog and Magog, would be cast into Gehenna, the fire pits outside Jerusalem where the Assyrian soldiers were cast in the days of King Hezekiah. (Mark 9:43) Gehenna had come to symbolically represent this resurrection of shame and contempt Daniel spoke of; those who would not enter God's eternal kingdom. The shocking thing was that this was determined by works of faith, not by race or outward religion. (John 8:40)

In the context of the first century, Jesus' message was about his new temple that would spread his kingdom throughout the world and would culminate in the resurrection, in the total fulfillment of God's promises to the Jews: a transformed world, sprouting from their Messiah.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."  
Matthew 5:5

The literal word here is land. The meek shall inherit the land. This is Jesus' land teaching. It pinpoints and locates his message. In the next section we apply Jesus' teachings in the Gospels to this background: how God's promises to Israel about inheriting their land would be fulfilled through the teachings and way of their Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth.

"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Matthew 6:10

In the parables of Jesus below the kingdom of God is depicted as renewing the whole world. The first parable is taken from Ezekiel 17 and shows the Messianic kingdom coming from Israel. It begins in an insignificant way, and replaces the oppressive empires of the world with a kingdom of care for neighbour. In the second parable the loaf of bread is the world, fully transformed by the resurrection life of Christ. The resurrection is the new leaven in the earth that renews all things.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches.” Matthew 13:31-32

“He told them still another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.” Matthew 13:33

“My kingdom doesn’t come with observation, but is within you.” (Luke 17:20-21) It doesn’t come with swords and spears, but renews our communities from within. It doesn’t come by some cataclysmic event, but like leaven transforms the dough, as the church follows Christ and fulfills its call in our nations.

## The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is monumental. There is no equal in history. It's a shame it has often received minimal attention in our worldview. Christian teaching often doesn't focus on it and it is rarely properly related to the gospel message. Yet this sermon is central to our identity as believers and to the church in the world. It is about the values of Christ's kingdom and how it progresses and fulfills God's plans. It should be at the forefront of our lives. Someone has said it describes "another world", meaning it is impractical. It does describe another world, which is the point. Earth won't be renewed cataclysmically, until the church follows this heavenly vision of real life.

We have heard the Sermon explained in different ways. Some have said Jesus was describing the law, showing that we can't possibly fulfill it, so we must embrace faith to be saved. This is partially true. It's a way of directing us to his mission to redeem those who have fallen short of the law, who see their sin and are hungry for righteousness. But that isn't all the Sermon on the Mount is about.

Others have said the Sermon is about his kingdom, but that the Sermon isn't fully relevant until his kingdom comes. They say his kingdom was offered to Israel and was rejected, so the kingdom and the teachings that apply to it are shelved until his Second Coming.

But both these ideas overthrow the Sermon and the commands of Christ. He told us to follow him. He said that when we call him Lord we should obey what he teaches. (Luke 6:46) And because Jesus said his kingdom was founded when he appeared in the first century, these teachings are about that kingdom and how it progresses through our nations today. The Sermon is his kingdom manifesto: "My kingdom is not like the world. They lord it over others, you will serve." (Matthew 20:25-28)

So the Sermon on the Mount does apply to us today. It's a call to all his disciples to follow him, to embrace the values of his kingdom and to live them out in a crooked and fallen world. It's to be light in darkness. (Matthew 5:14) This light isn't expressed in domineering ways, but through mercy, giving, suffering. It will cost something, because of the darkness which is being renewed. This is why we take up our cross, so light will prevail and his kingdom will transform our land. If everyone did this Hitler's regime would soon have been renewed from within.

Jesus' teachings go against our fallen instinct of self preservation. When he said, "If someone takes your coat give them your shirt also", we have said Jesus didn't mean that, but was just speaking about our attitude. We say if we did that there would be lawlessness, so to save our land we will take the matter to court. So we have a land filled with litigation. The shocking thing is that when we do what he said we find he was right. We have been just as wrong and

shocked about Jesus' teachings as the Jews were in the first century. The things we thought were important, the material things, aren't. Relationships are what matters. Jesus is speaking about how to build the good world, to create and inherit the good land.

This is the Promised Land. Missing this point, and transferring the Promised Land to the land we are fighting over now in the Middle East, might be one of the greatest tragedies of recent theology. The land in the Middle East, as any land, is to be possessed through the kingdom that Jesus portrayed in his life and teachings.

So we can see that Jesus' teachings are about this good land. They are about our life on earth. This is what we often haven't applied. We have believed on Jesus, but not followed him in the way we do life on earth. We haven't taken his teachings seriously. We can't really call our lack of acknowledgment of his teachings genuine faith, or really believing in Jesus.

Jesus taught about forgiving those who sin against us. He said when we sin against others we should go to them and seek to put things right. He said we should love our enemies. He said we should care for others in need, regardless of their race or faith. He said when we are persecuted we should seek to do the person good in return. He said we should care for others rather than store up goods for ourselves and for our own future. All his teachings on money expressed this

action. It's hard to find one find culture on earth today that follows this.

When we look at all Jesus' teachings we see they deal with the relationship issues of his time. If the people of his day had applied these things, Israel would not have been split into civil war and then destroyed by Rome. Jesus wept over Jerusalem and said, "If only you knew the ways that lead to peace." (Luke 19:42) These ways are the content of all he taught. They would lose the land because they didn't follow his teachings about how to inherit the land by doing what is right to their neighbour. Because they wouldn't care for each other, they would tear each other apart.

When we look at Jesus' parables, whether about the Good Samaritan, Lazarus and the Rich Man, the one who was forgiven much but who wouldn't forgive others, the lessons about loving those who are different from us, rather than just our friends, visiting the homes of the socially outcast, going to the territory of the enemy... we see all these teachings aren't just about having a right heart to make it to heaven, but about how to put things right with others here on earth. We may think Jesus visited their homes to bring the people back to God, not to heal society. But what is the difference and why are these different objectives? The Pharisees thought they could come back to God without coming back to their neighbour. Jesus is speaking about the promises of God to the Jews, and to the world, and saying this is how they come about. They aren't just about our

personal relationship with God, or about going to heaven, or just about faith, but about our actions, what to do in community on earth to renew it.

Jesus' teachings about our enemies are critical to renewing our local and global affairs. Everything we need today to heal relationships between communities and nations, to educate us about peace with those other faiths, is given by Jesus in the Gospels. When we have a close look at his teachings in this way and apply them to our communities and challenges, we find that there is nothing lacking in terms of understanding our response and how to shine his kingdom light. His teachings in this respect are comprehensive. They are all the world needs. All we have to do is do it and model his life to others around us. This is why Jesus came.

## Healing Our Land

James also was writing about the land. They were experiencing great upheaval in his day, and he was writing to show the way of it. He wasn't only writing about spiritual things, but also showing us what to do about our relationships in this world. Spiritual things should never be divorced from our relationships with all other people, near or far. In many parts of the world we are experiencing the same things today James spoke of, and the principles we see in the letter of James in the New Testament show us exactly how to respond in our own time.

Jesus and James both show us that the harm done to other groups of people begins with our social separation and isolation. Then there is distance between us and insensitivity to the human suffering of others. Putting things right with our neighbour then begins socially, social respect, friendships and love, rather than social shunning, and then it proceeds to care for each other in all things. Social integration, equality and care are needed, rather than charity from a distance. It starts with putting our relationships right.

James was a brother of Jesus and an apostle at Jerusalem during the period of its greatest strife. Jerusalem was passing through all the terrible tribulations Jesus spoke of in his final days. (Matthew 21-24) James was calling the people to repentance, addressing issues Jesus had taught on, about "the things that bring peace". (Luke 19:42) James was an

elder of the Jews, of a sect of Jews which followed Jesus of Nazareth. This was before Christianity had separated from Judaism. In many ways the letter of James was addressing all Jews in the lead up to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

So I have named James' letter: "James: Apostle of Peace Making". He wasn't just writing about a few important issues on our private faith. His was refocusing on Jesus' teachings, about the tribulation they were passing through and the wrong kind of community that caused that. James recapped Jesus' teachings on how the church renews the land. James 2:1-13 goes straight to the most important point. When they met in their assemblies (James used the word for synagogue here), they discriminated between the rich and poor. This betrayed a wider problem, where instead of loving their neighbour, they were creating divisions right through society that were tearing it apart.

We do this as Christians when we won't integrate with Muslims or with others of different cultures. When our faith becomes closed off and "tribal" it cannot spread and bring healing. It is normal for people to associate with those of our group or class, but James calls this judging others, failing to love our neighbours as fellow humans. Here the church takes a leading healing role in our communities. Jesus calls it not just loving your friends, for even the heathen love those who love them. (Luke 6:32)

James then focuses on violence. (James 4:1-6) Jesus said we should even love those who seek to harm us. (Matt 5:39, Luke 23:34) Many in the early church followed and taught this, claiming Jesus as their model. (1 Pet 2:18-25) James links violence with immorality and shows they share greed as their root, the desire to satisfy our personal wants. He claims our wars, though excused by propaganda are about national interest and wealth. He calls us to contentment, to reign in our desires and instead do others good. Our societies today are riddled with violence, on television, in the wars we fight overseas and in the global suffering produced by our commercial inequalities. We need to repent of our relaxed attitude towards violence, seeking peace and to serve the suffering.

James highlights the servant actions of the church within society as a major healing force of divisions and reiterates Jesus' teachings on the use of our wealth to bring this about. Real faith is helping the widow and the orphan, clothing the naked and feeding the poor. (James 1:27, 2:16, 5:3-5) This is what Jerusalem was lacking. Many lived in luxury and self-indulgence, storing up their wealth. James called them to serve others. It's the same principle throughout his letter: mercy and help towards others instead of judging them heals our land. An imbalance of wealth in the world brings trouble, divisions and insurgents, while serving brings healing.

James calls us not to judge or speak evil of others, bringing rancor and distance between people in our communities.

(James 4:11-12, 3:1-12, 1:19, Matthew 7:1) “Don’t bad-mouth each other, friends. It’s God’s Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You’re supposed to be honoring the Message (by living it yourself), not writing graffiti (treading) all over it.” (James 4:11, *The Message*) Our job isn’t to judge whether others are following the Lord, but to seek to follow him ourselves. Judging others, conservative infighting, doesn’t heal our land, as Jerusalem discovered, but only adds to the sectarianism. We don’t overcome evil with evil, but with good.

James calls the people to evaluate their faith by their works. (James 2:18) They murdered those who didn’t oppose them: the Christians of that generation. (James 5:6) Christendom has also done that down through the ages, and our nations do that today to large numbers of people. So many things done in Christ’s name wouldn’t have been done if we had taken James to heart. We need to ask, do we have a faith by name only, without obeying what Jesus told us to do, while others we call our enemies, show their genuine faith by their love for their neighbour? Or we can ask, can Muslims or our enemy see our faith and see Jesus by the way we treat them self-sacrificially in love?

One of James’ last statements highlights again his most important point: “Therefore confess your faults to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.” (James 5:16) When we have wronged someone we should confess that, and pray, seeking ways to make amends and help

restore each other. This is all that is necessary for healing in our relationships and between our nations. This is the door into learning what it means to follow Jesus. We need to confess our faults for reconciliation and healing with others. We can't have reconciliation with others, or peace in this world, unless we seek to repair the wrong we have done. (Matthew 7:5)

James concluded by saying the Judge, who hears the cries of the downtrodden, stands at the door. He came to judge on the behalf of the weak in that generation as Jesus foretold, a destruction that was brought upon the people by their own actions. They were like dogs who couldn't bark to warn about what was coming, asleep when watchmen were needed. (Isaiah 56:10) The same applies to us today. If we read these "signs of the times" in our lives, communities and nations, we can come to a positive repentance for the renewal of our land. (Luke 12:54-56)

There is a lot of inhumanity in the world today, just as there was in James' day. If we characterize one group of people as the source of the problem then it will lead to terrible inhumanity towards that group. This isn't the way out of our current problems. Instead our role as a church is to help those who suffer. We are to get involved in their suffering, like Christ got involved in ours, then maybe many in that group will come to faith, and so we become part of the solution. This is not weakness, but it is using courage in the right direction.

## A Non-Supremacist Gospel

God has called the church to follow Jesus, walking the way he walked. If we want peace in our land today we need to think about our past and current actions in the world and the way we understand the basic gospel message. God has called the church to model reconciliation through caring for our enemy in a self-sacrificial way, just as Jesus has done for us, not to an aggressive stance in the world.

We have often taken God's election in a supremacist way. When God chose Israel, their temptation was to think they were above others, but God called them to serve the nations, to represent his image of love and care to others. We can still carry this idea about our supremacist role in the world through our Christian cultures, and even pass it on to others through missions. But this isn't a biblical picture of land. When God said we would be the head and not the tail, in Christ we see this happens by the church serving, by God reconciling his enemies on his cross, rather than destroying them. It means showing by example, not being dragged around as the tail following the world's bad example.

Growing up on the north side of Sydney I hadn't heard much about the Aboriginal problem. It didn't exist as far as I was concerned. We tried to love God, but that was mainly in the context of our own lives, family, neighbors and friends. A main focus of our lives was obtaining the right career to secure our futures. Over the years we have come to hear

more about how life has been in Australia for the Aboriginal populations. We have travelled more in Australia and have spoken to older Christians; some of whom have cared a lot for Aboriginal people.

It's hard to understand how some of the things that happened did happen. Our forefathers in Australia were often strong Christian believers who lived loving lives, but somehow there was a cultural blind spot. This has often happened with godly people in the past, or in the scripture. We are justified by faith and that often means God accepts and loves us even when we get a lot of other things wrong. The problem is when we go on repeating the same patterns of behaviour in our own time, but in different situations and towards different people.

We now know a lot of Aboriginals were killed, sometimes systematically in different parts of the nation. Great numbers of them were forcefully moved and their land taken from them. They were relocated to camps and given rations. Their whole way of life and culture was taken from them, leaving them utterly demeaned. It wasn't until 1967 that they were granted citizenship in their own country. This type of thing happened in most places in the world where Europeans settled, to whole people groups, as our nations expanded their influence and wealth. Yet there were also many people who sought to love and serve others, despite the trends of the time.

But what I want us to see is that these types of things are often justified from scripture. It was said about the settlement of Australia that it was “a land without a people” when Europeans came. For the Aboriginals who were here, a common attitude towards them was something like this: “God has a purpose for this land now. It can’t accommodate your culture or way of life. You have to get with God’s purpose for the nations or be left behind.” This isn’t a biblical picture of land. We can always find a few proof texts from the scriptures to show that the land is ours, but the scriptures shouldn’t be used this way.

Often the Aboriginals had a more biblical view of land. The memos of explorers who met Aboriginals show their attitude: “This isn’t our land. It belongs to God (though the view of God was different in some ways to the biblical view). Therefore, we are called to share and to honour you in the land. The land can take us both. You can honour our life style as we honour yours. We can accept, love and learn to help each other and live together in this land.” I would say this is a biblical vision of land, and one we must understand in order to follow what Jesus taught, to see his blessings upon our future nations. This view reflects more respect, for God, for the land and for other people.

Paul spoke about us honouring people in their cultures, especially since cultures in some ways reflect our religious conscience. (Romans 14, 1 Corinthians 8-10) Religious conscience is a good thing. It shouldn’t be trampled upon,

but nurtured as we give room for the Holy Spirit to bring change through enlightenment in his time through the gospel message. Paul was speaking about Christians from different backgrounds, but the principal is the same in missions. Instead of imposing our way upon others we are to give up our own rights and be all things to all men. The apostles at Jerusalem said the conscience of the Jews must similarly be respected. (Acts 15:19-21)

Paul taught us to learn to live together with people with other customs, rather than force mono-culturalism upon our land. He didn't say the Jewish customs were wrong; therefore we should make them change. He taught that our different customs don't justify any of us before God, but faith does. In that case we should accept one another with different customs, and live together in love. Faith and love are the point. Mono-culturalism is supremacist and it isn't biblical. It existed in some ways in the Old Testament, with the food laws, but Jesus' death has fulfilled those Old Testament rituals, and has brought down that wall that divided us, and enabled us to accept and accommodate one another in faith. (Ephesians 2:11-22)

Christ is sending us into the world with a "land vision", but not one we have learned and followed down through the ages, where we conquer others, but one where we seek to reveal his kingdom through a new life style. If we Christians could learn what it means to bring the Prince of Peace into the regions of the world today where we have the most

conflict between ourselves and other people, we would go a long way towards the manifestation of the sons of God. (Isaiah 9:6, Romans 8:19) Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for these shall be called the sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9) Are these the same sons (children) of God Paul spoke of? In shifting our cultural patterns to reflect Christ’s we are not only revealing the true Christ, but coming to truly know him ourselves.

We don’t fix the land through force, for all that does is raise up more insurgents for the future, which are filling our lands already today. Rather we take the land through serving our enemy, as a model for the gospel message of which we are the stewards. We must be the true representatives of this message. We are to overcome evil with good, not with force. Jesus said it clearly; “The world seeks to lord it over others, you shall not be that way...” (Matthew 20: 25-28) We do his kingdom his way. Paul contrasts these two worldviews:

“Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign... We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment. (1 Corinthians 4:8-13)

Our apologetics in world religions has often been motivated by our felt-need to be the head, to control our land and denounce the cultures of others. We have often handed this form of thinking on to people in missions, which hasn't equipped them in any way to face their enemies and renew their land. We have often passed on to others that we can come back to God by faith without seeking healing with our enemy, without taking up our cross to seek wider community, without coming back to our neighbour and without being peacemakers. We are partly responsible for the divisions we see in these nations today.

First, we must truly love and seek to serve our enemies in their suffering. Second, we need a new way of looking at apologetics, which seeks to build bridges, not walls, where there is a lot more charity: seeing God's hand in other faiths, through his general grace, and using that to draw people to the Person of Truth, who is Christ. (John 14:6) As John said, he is the Word that lights every man who comes into the world, and nothing was made except through him. (John 1:3, 9) So all truth points to him and has its fulfillment in him. We have nothing to fear from being charitable towards truth, and learning from it when we see it on others. That means we can reach others with love and respect, and cooperate with them in community and peacemaking, without demeaning whole groups of people.

How do we see land today? Do we see it as something to be conquered, or where we enforce "God's end-times

program”? How do we see other people in our land? Do we see them as people we must change before we can love and respect them? Or do we see them as the Good Samaritan in Christ’s teaching saw the suffering Jew man on the road to Jericho. This is the land Jesus spoke of. We are called to inherit land by praying God’s true kingdom comes into our midst, by seeking love, justice and true care for all the people who live in it, and thereby modeling the Christ we serve and proclaim.

## A Non-Supremacist Eschatology

Eschatology (end-times theories) is one of the most disastrous areas when it comes to our faith. It can contribute to such callousness in the face of the suffering of humanity. When we have a vision of things going bad and of war as central to our end-times theories we won't seek peace, and we won't act as the church should act in the world. In fact we will call those who seek peace in the Middle East the antichrist. How can we stray so far from the teachings of Jesus?

End-times theories are just that: theories. We have been wrong so many times in the past, with much human collateral damage, and we can be wrong again. This is one area where we need to back off from our fundamentalism, and listen to each other in the body of Christ. One thing that fragments the church the most today is our view on Israel. But this shouldn't be the case. We need to embrace the character of Christ and receive and love each other and not let these views fragment us. One-body is the witness to the world that Christ is Lord.

So we can't let our end-times beliefs overcome the most important issues in our faith, in the scriptures, in the gospel and in the nature of Christ. When we look through the Prophets of the Old Testament, for example, what do we see as the paramount message there? When we think of Amos and Hosea, and all the Prophets, we don't see a call to

nationalism, but a call to love and to justice. It was this message that Jesus' modeled. The Prophets aren't there for us to speculate on end-times, but to teach us to care for our neighbour. This is our prime theology when it comes to our call to follow Jesus. The Prophets are a call for us to be involved in helping those in the world today who are suffering.

1,000 years ago the church had a theory about Jerusalem and end-times and called for the Crusades. So many suffered and our theory was wrong. We acted unjustly towards others and justified this by our faith. Some years ago I watched a well known "prophet" speaking on television, calling America to war in Iraq to "take back the Promised Land" and to enable Jesus to return. Unbelievable! How many thousands of civilians, men, women and children died in that war, and suffered in hospitals without medicines? These are people just like us, who have the same loving aspirations for their young children as we do.

Recently I was appalled to hear the words of a man I met in a church, who asked me if I knew the latest about the book of Revelation. He went on to say the book describes our generation, in which the Arab people are the antichrist and God will use America to destroy them in a war, again in order to allow Jesus to return. He said the occurrence of four blood moons (eclipses) during 2014-15 confirmed this. You hear different theories like this in churches, but this time I was especially shocked. We claim some mosques generate violent

ideas, but don't hear the violence that comes from our own lips, against so many millions of families, and then go our way claiming we are the peaceful religion.

A study of the history of the Middle East region in more recent times shuts our mouth in playing any blame game when it comes to current world events. Our Western nations have directly played a part in raising dictators who have brought suffering to millions, in equipping them for wars that have killed millions of people, and finally in using our own armies to kill many more while trying to clean up the mess, all because of our desires in the region for resources, business and strategic interest. It's one of the biggest disasters of our generation, but we tend to so easily brush it aside as though we have nothing to do with it. Our involvement in the region since the First World War is directly related to the rise of world terrorism. Today there are nine million refugees (men, women and children) from the Syrian civil war, which the West played a major role in encouraging.

The issue is not that we are bad and the others are good. It isn't that Islam is good and we are the problem. This issue is how to overcome evil, both the evil of others and the evil our nations have contributed to. We are having a look at what Jesus and James taught and applying that to our lives and the world we find ourselves in today. If we are going to follow Jesus and James we will need to temper our end-times theories and see people as people and reach out to serve them, like Jesus served his unknown disciples, washing their

feet as a household slave. This is our call in the world. If we are journeying to the Promised Land, we can't get there by killing our enemies, but by loving them and praying for them to turn from their evil and journey there with us.

## Your Kingdom Come

Imagine being alive in the days when Jesus came. Rome is occupying Israel. They are a brutal army. Family and friends have been savagely treated by their violence, ungodliness and corruption. You see the promises in the Prophets, that God will deliver Israel from the gentile powers. Every Jewish person you know who is serious about their faith is committed to these promises and is zealous to see them come to pass.

Into this backdrop Jesus appears. Is he the promised "Moses" who shall take us out of our captivity? But instead of challenging Rome he says we should be peacemakers. Imagine the confusion, turmoil and the sense of betrayal of their hope created by Jesus' teaching, "Blessed are the meek, blessed are those who are hungry, merciful, persecuted, peacemakers." That isn't the Messiah they had in mind. They had in mind a faith that would help them destroy their enemies. The "stand" Jesus said we should take is not the usual "zealous" stand we often encourage. It's a very different message.

If Jesus came to our churches today he would have a similar message for us in our global context and he would often be just as much rejected now as he was then. His message often isn't the type of faith we envisage, it isn't the response to our global threats we see as appropriate. We still largely embrace a different way of doing things. Christ would still be seen as a

traitor of our group, of our desires for protection and salvation from harm. When Jesus entered Jerusalem they cried out, “Hosanna”, meaning “Save us now”. This is not the gospel, but is still our way of looking at things.

Paul received the same response. “The Prophets were plain; when Messiah comes he would subject Israel’s enemies.” But Paul spoke of grace towards their enemies. “How could this man be of God?” He spoke of their enemies being joint heirs with Israel and fellow sons of Abraham, even without being made subject to their culture. Is this what the Prophets meant? Is this how their enemies would be subjected under Messiah, by the gospel? Was God speaking of a peaceful community, where wolf and lamb (Israel and her enemies) would be at peace? This is too much for our present way of thinking to assimilate. No wonder Paul was stoned.

What was Jesus command to his disciples then? It was, “Do not resist evil.” (Matthew 5:39) This meant do not resist evil with violence, or with more evil. It didn’t mean don’t resist evil at all. As Paul said, it means to seek ways to overcome evil with good. (Romans 12:21) Jesus wasn’t telling us to be passive, but active disciples in this world seeking to overcome evil his way. So when we look at what is happening in the world today, we don’t try to overcome the fear of our nations being Islamized by a cruel treatment of refugees, but by showing them due love and care. This is our call.

This is how the church should respond to others in our land today, to Muslims. “Won’t they attack us, and do to us what Rome did to Israel?” What did Jesus say about the Roman soldiers? He said carry their load two miles. Is he mad? This is how the church renewed Rome. Can’t we trust in the power of God’s Spirit today? Won’t God’s kingdom renew the world in the same way now? Won’t God be faithful to his promises? The message of Christ was so radical then and still is, but this is God’s way to take us in Christ to his new land, but to go there together with our enemies. It’s time to embrace the message and life of Jesus in our world, not just in theory, but in practice.

And how should we respond to the threats against the nation of Israel today? Well, shouldn’t these be overcome the same way? If Israel is to inherit the land today won’t that be done through kindness to their enemies, going the second mile, overcoming evil with good? Has Jesus changed his mind about how his kingdom comes in our time? Does it come by force, by subjecting our enemies? Or does it come by including them, seeking their wellbeing, seeking to care for all people equally as fellow humans. Isn’t this what Jesus taught us about other people? If we desire Israel to succeed we must address the racism and nationalism, the suffering of the Palestinian people, including the harm that has come to the Palestinian Christian community.

This is our way of coming together as a church. Whatever our view on Israel today, we can agree on the teachings and life

of Jesus, that serving others is the way to overcome. It is in losing our life that we gain it, and if we want Israel to gain their life then this is the message of the church to the nation. This was the message of the Prophets to the nation of old, and if this message isn't heard today great suffering will overflow in the years ahead, and that won't be in anyone's interest. If Jews could understand the Palestinians' suffering and find better ways to respond it; and if Palestinians could understand the Jews' suffering, which has often been at the hand of Europeans, rather than Muslims or Palestinians... if we could respond to each other's narrative, listen to their story, walk in their shoes, associate with them, love each other! This is the message of the church and how we can help lead all to Christ, who suffered to redeem us all.

So let's not react to people in need today through the spectrum of our theories on Armageddon and "wars and rumours of wars", or fulfillments of prophecy, like people did in Christ's time, to try to bring about Messiah's kingdom. Christ's kingdom doesn't come that way, but by the plain teachings he gave us during his life, which the modeled by his own service, death and resurrection. Let's understand that our role as Christ's people in the world isn't to identify who God's enemies are, but to triumph over the enemy of all with different weapons, to serve all those who suffer, no matter their race, creed or disposition to us. This is how we represent Christ, with compassion, with acts of mercy and without favouritism.

In the famous poem said to be written by the German pastor Martin Niemöller, the voicelessness of the church towards the suffering is lamented. Where was the church when the powers of the world trod down the weak? “First they came for the Socialists”, Martin said, “and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me... and there was no one left to speak for me.” No matter who suffers, whether or not they are in our economic, political or religious group, if we don’t stand for them the world will grow in injustice and we will be next. In loving all we love ourselves.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was also a German pastor and martyr in the last days of Hitler’s rule. His greatest appeal was about the voicelessness of the church towards the suffering of others. You think of that often in our day. Where was the voice of the church when the Aborigines were trodden down? Where is our voice today for the suffering? How can we claim to be followers of Christ and deny the central theme of his kingdom: “I was hungry and you fed me, in prison and you visited me?” By the plain teachings of Jesus we cannot say this is restricted to those of our group. Our churches need to come together in unity and in compassion and be Christ’s representative in this world. This is our call and the cross Jesus spoke about. Showing Christ’s love is the

avenue through which we preach Christ's gospel of eternal salvation. This is his way to renew our land.

## A New King

“On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine, the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the covering that enfolds all peoples, the veil that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth.” (Isaiah 25:6-8)

One of the most beautiful texts from one of the most beautiful books in the scripture, Isaiah, speaking of the new kingdom that shall sprout through a child born and spread through the nations renewing all things! There is no more glorious vision than that in Isaiah, but it is also a vision that is accomplished in part through suffering: both the suffering of the Messiah and of his people, both those in the Old and in the New Covenants.

The mountain is Jerusalem, where Christ would die for sin and swallow up death. The mountain is also his kingdom, which would rise above all other kingdoms, and bring renewal to the world. This would happen “in the last days”; the time of the New Covenant, when Christ would come to his people Israel, born as a humble babe, and establish his kingdom in all nations: the time we are living in today. (Isaiah 2:1-4, 9:1-7) He would swallow up death, both on his cross and in the world, and when every enemy is placed under him

it would be fulfilled in the earth: he has wiped away every tear and curse from his creation. He would feed the nations with life, as it is said in Revelation 21-22.

“He will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth”: Wasn’t this the desire of Israel, and see how God fulfills it. Not through force and armies, not through a worldly styled kingdom, not the way of a moral or nationalist zealot, not through a cataclysmic destruction of this age, but by his Son’s death and resurrection, and Spirit renewing our lives and calling us to follow the way of Christ, selflessness and care for our brother, neighbour and enemy: an entirely new kingdom, overcoming the old, bringing to naught the powers of darkness in our world. (1 Corinthians 1:28, Ephesians 3:10)

Isaiah shows how Christ’s kingdom inherits the earth, just as Christ said in the Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5:3-10) This theme runs through the whole of Isaiah: the nature of Christ in his Spirit filled people towards the foreigner, the helpless, the enemy and the poor; being willing to show mercy and to suffer with them just as Messiah did for us. God is calling us to be with Christ, on the right side of worldly power: “Each one will be like a shelter from the wind and a refuge from the storm, like streams of water in the desert and the shadow of a great rock in a thirsty land.” (Isaiah 32:2)

And Isaiah portrays this with the most beautiful poetry: “Execute judgment (justice for those who suffer); make thy shadow as the night in the midst of the noonday; hide the

outcasts; bewray not him that wandereth. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee... be thou a covert to them from the face of the spoiler: for the extortioner is at an end, the spoiler ceaseth, the oppressors are consumed out of the land. And in mercy shall the throne be established: and he shall sit upon it in truth in the tabernacle of David, judging, and seeking judgment, and hasting righteousness.” (Isaiah 16:3-5)

The NIV interprets this passage as a call to Judah to care for the refugees of Maob, Judah’s sworn enemy, when Assyria had cast the Moabites out of their land. Throughout Isaiah Syria, Assyria and Babylon all represent worldly greed and the human suffering it causes. The call of God to his church is a startling contrast: “Make your shadow like thick darkness at midday.” When our enemy is suffering we are to rush to their aid, as a thick shadow hiding them from the hot sun. This is God’s command. We are not permitted to hide behind our fears, our nationalism, our religion and or other issues. All people are to be saved in their time of need.

In mercy, or in love (NIV), Christ’s throne shall be established in the nations. In the final outcome the tyrant will vanish from the entire land, and all things are renewed. When Christ returns the land will be free of all oppression: “Your eyes will see the king in his beauty and view a land that stretches afar. In your thoughts you will ponder the former terror... You will see those arrogant people no more...” (Isaiah 33:17-19) Texts like this are used by John in Revelation to describe Christ’s global kingdom and victory of love through his church.

It's fascinating to see how John the Baptist announces the kingdom of God. Malachi says he will turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the hearts of the children to their parents. (Malachi 3:1, 4:5-6, Matthew 11:14) This is a complete turnaround from the values of greed depicted in Isaiah. It's looking after those around us. It's reconciliation with each other through care, whether at home, with our enemies, or with those in need in other nations. It's caring for our community and the creation we have been given, rather than firstly for our own commercial desires. This has the potential of restoring so many things, just as Isaiah predicted. John put the coming of the kingdom this way:

"Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same."  
(Luke 3:11)

This simple statement is a kingdom paradigm. It is primarily a statement about our reconciliation with others. We used to act in our own interest and not for all others, now we seek reconciliation with all. We seek community with all people.

Isaiah also foretold John's message. He would go before the Lord and cry, "Make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up, every mountain and hill made low; the rough ground shall become level, the rugged places a plain." (Isaiah 40:4) We have often seen this as referring to our private spiritual life, but it is referring to the fruit of that transformation, to our relationships, to

reconciliation, to serving those in need. The proud are brought low, and the low are lifted up. There is repentance towards our neighbour. Community is healed, just as when Cyrus delivered the community from Babylon.

Malachi said John would come “before the great and terrible day of the Lord”, warning of God’s judgment on Jerusalem, seeking to put relationships right, to bring repentance in the way people treated each other. This was the intent of James shortly before that day came, shown by his quote from John’s mission: “Let the brother of low degree rejoice in that he is exalted: But the rich, in that he is made low: because as the flower of the grass he shall pass away.” (James 1:9-10, Isaiah 40:4-6) James wasn’t suggesting this is just a spiritual blessing, but he made it the paradigm of his epistle: reconciliation within community following the model and teachings of Jesus.

This reconciliation, this care of the church for others, prepares the way for the coming of the kingdom of God on earth and this kingdom in all our nations is the Promised Land, the healing of the nations through God's people. This Promised Land isn’t just about our private spiritual lives, or about going to heaven when we die, it’s about all people, it’s about our communities, our creation and the world in which we live today.