

**Address by Fr Peter McVerry to the
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We are Church

How can I invite a young person to join a male dominated, authoritarian institution, which crushes dissent and even tries to control what topics may be discussed?

I believe the Gospels point us in a direction which can contribute to solving the problems which our country and our world experience today. However, my disappointment with the Church is that, far from leading young people to the riches of the Gospel, it has become, at least in the Western world, a major obstacle to the promotion of the Gospel.

So what does it mean to say “We are Church”? What reforms would I like to see within the Church?

I can only share with you today how I understand the role of the Church and therefore what reforms I would propose for our Church today.

Jesus didn’t found a Church. Jesus was a prophet, prophets don’t found institutions - they criticise the ones they already have.

But Jesus was more than a prophet. He was the Messiah. But Messiahs don’t found Churches either. They found movements.

Jesus didn’t come to attack the Jewish faith and to replace it with yet another faith. Jesus didn’t come to criticise Jewish spirituality or forms of worship and to replace them with a different spirituality or different forms of worship. Jesus was a Jew, through and through, with a strong love for Judaism and a passion for the fulfilment of the promises that God had made to the Jewish people. The Messiah was the one that Israel had been awaiting all those years since Moses. The Messiah was to complete the Exodus which began with Moses, to finally liberate Israel from all that oppressed them, and lead them into the Kingdom over which God would rule for ever. And from Israel, finally, would come salvation for all the world; Israel’s enemies would be vanquished and peace and justice would reign on earth. Jesus, the Messiah, came to fulfil the promises that God had made to Israel, not to abolish them.

So at the centre of Jesus’ mission was his announcement that “**the Kingdom of God is at hand**”^[1]. Finally, God’s promises to Israel were now being fulfilled. If the role of the Church is to complete the mission that Jesus began, then we have to ask: what did Jesus mean by “the Kingdom of God is at hand?” Was he talking about a “spiritual” Kingdom? What did Jesus mean when he said: “**The Kingdom belongs to the poor**?”^[2] Was he talking about the “spiritually poor”?

That is, in fact, the dominant understanding of the mission of Jesus: that Jesus was a teacher who came to announce a moral code, a code which is timeless, and which all are to follow, and, if we do so, we will receive a reward in Heaven. The Kingdom of God that Jesus announced, then, is understood to be a spiritual Kingdom that is in Heaven, and the poor who will enter this Kingdom are the spiritually poor who accept the authority and laws of God. I would disagree with this understanding of the mission of Jesus. Such a spirituality is inward looking, self-centred: it is focused on myself, my goal, and what I have to do to achieve that goal. But the spirituality of the Gospels is outward looking: it is focused on others and their needs, inviting us to forget ourselves, even to die to ourselves, for the sake of our brothers and sisters. The flaw in that dominant spirituality is that it fails to explain why Jesus was crucified. You don’t get crucified for telling people to love one another or for inviting them

into a Kingdom after death.

But you might get crucified for inviting people into a Kingdom that begins here on earth. If you announce that a Kingdom is about to burst into this world, some people will take fright. Herod certainly did – he massacred all the children under 2 years of age to try and prevent it happening. Child protection policies were not a priority in Herod’s Kingdom. Pilate too got a fright when he was told that Jesus had proclaimed himself king – “If you set him free, you are no friend of Caesar’s; anyone who makes himself king is defying Caesar.....We have no king but Caesar.”

But it wasn’t just Herod or Pilate who got a fright. Jesus came and lived amongst a people where the vast majority lived at a subsistence level, never sure where tomorrow’s food would come from. When Jesus asked them to pray: “Give us this day our daily bread,” this was a real prayer for them, as it is today for those millions living on the edge of starvation.

Many also lived a life of destitution: those with infirmities, the blind, the lame, the deaf, the dumb, the lepers. They had no life, they simply survived from day to day, forced to beg just to stay alive, a very precarious existence.

Others were rejected and unwanted and pushed to the margins of their society: those who were considered to be sinners, with no regard for the Law. They were despised and ostracised.

And yet a small minority, perhaps 7-8%, lived lives of ostentatious wealth, living in mansions, with no concern for the poor and the hungry around them. These were the royal court, the priests and religious aristocracy who became wealthy through the buying and selling of sacrificial offerings in the Temple, the rich landowners, many of them Herod’s friends, who had accumulated large tracts of land by the simple policy of confiscating land from small landowners, often on the pretext that they were unable to pay the exorbitant tax that Herod demanded of them. But Herod didn’t need much pretext, he had absolute power to do whatever he wanted, and there was no court of appeal.

When Jesus talked about the rich man ^[3][4] “who feasted sumptuously every day and was dressed in the finest linen” and who couldn’t even be bothered to gather up the crumbs that fell from his table to give them to the poor man at his gate, the people Jesus was talking to knew exactly, some from their own experience, what he was talking about. Many of them would have visited the cities where the rich lived, either to find some work, or on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for one of the Jewish festivals, and would have seen, and been shocked by, the sight of destitute beggars sitting at the gates of the mansions of the rich. Just as today, many visitors to Dublin see, and are shocked by, the number of homeless people begging on the street or sleeping in doorways.

And when Jesus talked about the rich landowner^[5] who had a massive harvest and said to himself: “What I am to do? I know, I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones” without any consideration for those around him who were hungry, the people Jesus was talking to knew exactly what part of town these guys lived in.

And when Jesus talked about the labourers^[6] who waiting in the market square all day, hoping to get a few hours work so that they could feed their family that day, the people Jesus was talking to knew exactly what he was talking about: some of them, no doubt, had “been there, done that”.

These were not made-up stories Jesus told; this was real life, as people experienced it. And this was not what God had in mind when God liberated the chosen people from Egypt and led them through the desert into the promised land. This was not a Kingdom over which God could possibly want to reign, a Kingdom where people had to struggle to survive and to maintain any sense of their own dignity, a Kingdom where injustice and oppression reigned, in

place of God.

And Jesus, the Messiah, came to fulfil the Exodus promise and lead the people into a new Kingdom, a Kingdom where the poor and the rejected would live together in dignity and peace, a Kingdom that would be ruled, not by a violent, oppressive ruler like Herod, but by God, a King of compassion.

“The Kingdom of God is at hand.”

This was indeed good news to the poor.

Everywhere Jesus went, he was followed by large crowds. Five thousand people, not counting women and children, listened to him all day long, even forgetting that they were hungry[7]. Every town he went into, the whole town, we are told, turned out to hear him[8]. The poor man who was paralysed and wanted Jesus to cure him couldn't get near Jesus because of the crowds[9]. “Large crowds followed him, coming from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judaea and Transjordan,”[10] the Gospel writers tell us.

Who were all these people that followed Jesus to hear what he had to say? Few of them were rich; the rich lived in the cities and there is no record of Jesus ever going into the cities to preach; except once, he went to Jerusalem and we know what happened to him there! No, Jesus preached in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee, which is where the poor, ordinary people lived, people who struggled to feed their families, to pay their taxes – the nobodies of his society. Clearly, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to them; they were enthused by what he was saying and couldn't get enough of him. Jesus filled them with hope, with expectation.

The rich and the powerful – the somebodies of his society - amongst whom were to be found the Pharisees, the scribes, the lawyers and the priests, also occasionally listened to what Jesus was saying. But their response was to **“go away and plot how to get rid of him.”**[11] Clearly, what Jesus was saying was not irrelevant to the rich and powerful either because they were infuriated by what he was saying and quickly had quite enough of him.

So it wasn't just Herod and Pilate who took fright at the announcement that the Kingdom of God was at hand. The wealthy and the powerful also did. Jesus is announcing the imminent coming of a Kingdom where people will live by totally different values to the values of the Kingdom of Herod in which they were now living. In this sense, the Kingdom Jesus announced was indeed a “spiritual” Kingdom, one that demanded repentance, a change of heart. But living by these values had radical consequences for the concrete economic, social and political way of life of those who follow Jesus. For those who choose to enter this Kingdom and live by its values, their wealth was to be shared, not stored; they were to welcome and value and respect everyone, no-one was to be rejected, despised, treated as second-class, or marginalised; those who were leaders in this movement were called to serve others, not themselves. When Jesus said: **“The time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent and believe the Good News,”**[12] the word “repent” did not have exactly the same connotation as it has today. Today it means, “Be sorry for your sins.” But in Jesus' time, and in the context in which he was speaking, it meant “Change your way of life and believe in the new way of life of the Kingdom of God, which is Good News.”

But Jesus is not just telling people what life in the coming Kingdom of God will be like; by his actions, Jesus is inaugurating that Kingdom,

When Jesus healed the blind and the lame and the lepers, who were excluded and told by their own religious leaders that they were cursed by God, in the very act of being healed they *experienced* what the Kingdom of God was all about, new life, inclusion, respect, being valued, a Kingdom ruled by a God who is compassion.

And when Jesus ate with sinners[13], who were told by their own religious leaders that they were forsaken by God, in their table fellowship with Jesus they *experienced* what the Kingdom of God was all about, the unconditional forgiveness of the God of compassion.

And when Jesus reached out, in friendship, to the poor, the unwanted and marginalised, who were told by their own religious leaders that God had rejected them, they *experienced* what the Kingdom of God was all about, God's acceptance of them.

This Kingdom that Jesus announced had already come in the person of Jesus.

The early Christian community

The early Christian community, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, understood that they were to continue the mission of Jesus. The Kingdom of God that began in the life and person of Jesus, continues now, in this community, to be present in our world.

The early Christians understood, then, that on entering the Christian community, a person took on the responsibility of living in this new Kingdom of God. That is to say, they were to live together in radical solidarity with each other, loving each other with a love that was willing to share everything for the sake of those in need of any kind. Just as Jesus had given up everything, including what was most precious to him, his own life, for our sake, so they, as followers of Jesus were to be prepared to give up everything, even what may be most precious to them, for the sake of their brothers and sisters. And so the rich young man, a good young man, a young man who had kept all the commandments from his youth, whom, we are told, "**Jesus looked on him and loved him,**"[14] nevertheless, he could not be admitted to the community of the followers of Jesus, because his unwillingness to share what he had for the sake of those in need was a contradiction to everything that Jesus lived and preached, incompatible with living in the Kingdom of God. This community understood that all they had were gifts, given to them by God, not so that they could have a good life and enjoy themselves, (like the guy in the Kingdom of Herod who built bigger barns to store his harvest) but so that they (now living in the Kingdom of God) could use them for the benefit of others. They were, therefore, to share their resources, their time, their talents, their skills for the sake of those who needed them.

They also understood that, just as Jesus ate with tax collectors and sinners, foreshadowing that final feast in the Kingdom of God in heaven, this radical inclusiveness, revealed by the actions of Jesus, was normative for their community and life together. In their community, no-one was to be unwanted, rejected or marginalised. Everyone has the same dignity of being a child of God and that dignity was to be recognised and affirmed by the way in which the Christian community reached out to them and accepted them.

When we express our disappointment and even anger with our Church today, and seek to reform it, we must first ask ourselves: are we living the life which Jesus asked of his followers? Are we a caring and sharing community, are we a community which reaches out to all on the margins or is the same inequality and the same marginalisation which we find in society present also within our community? If an alien were to land on earth, and ask where could they find some of these people who call themselves Christian, what would we tell them? We would probably tell them to find a Church somewhere and talk to some of the people leaving that Church on a Sunday morning.

But that is not what Jesus had in mind for the movement which he began. The way of life of the early community caused astonishment to the pagans that observed them. What was it that caused such astonishment? Not "see how they go to Church every Sunday," or "see how they spend a long time in prayer," but "see how they love one another." They loved one another with the same radical love as their leader and King, the one they followed, the model

for their life together, the risen Jesus who had given his life for them.

As long, then, as people are homeless in our midst, as long as travellers live on the side of the road in our midst, as long as some have to live in poverty, homelessness and hopelessness in our own country, and some have to suffer hunger, disease and early death in many parts of our world, then we have failed to follow the risen Jesus as he asked us to do.

To love one another as he has loved us has radical economic, social and political consequences for us today, just as it did in his day. Have we been so compromised by wealth, has our Church been so seduced by wealth, power and status that we have diverted from the path of following Jesus to the cross.

Israel was awaiting a Messiah who would destroy Israel's enemies, vindicating Israel and ushering in an era of peace and justice, a Kingdom over which the God of Israel would rule for ever. When Jesus, the Messiah, came, he announced that Israel itself was part of the problem, that Israel itself was an obstacle to the coming of the Kingdom of God and that the injustice and oppression within Israel itself was an affront to its God and to the dignity of God's children. God had, in the past, Jesus told them, heard the cries of his people enslaved in Egypt and sent Moses to rescue them from their oppression and lead them into the promised land. So too now, God had heard the cries of his people and sent his Messiah to rescue them from their oppression and lead them into the Kingdom of God, a Kingdom of justice and peace, over which God would reign.

Yes, I would like a Church leadership which affirmed the equality of male and female in its structures; yes I would like a Church leadership which listened and dialogued instead of issuing dictats; yes I would like a Church leadership that gave lay people their rightful role in the Church.

But if we, as Church, lived the values of the Kingdom, if our way of life were a light to a world that is filled with the darkness of injustice and oppression, then the rest might fall into place. Because we would be so busy being reviled, vilified and persecuted that the changes we so desire would inevitably have to happen.

[1] Mark 1 v 15

[2] Luke 6 v 20

[4] Luke 16 v 19-31

[5] Luke 12 v 13-21

[6] Matt 20 v 1-16

[7] Luke 9 v10-17

[8] Mark 2 v 2.

[9] Luke 5 v17-26

[10] Matt 4 v 25

[11] Matt 12 v14

[12] Mark 1 v 15

[13] Matt 9 v 9-13

[14] Mark 10 v 21