

## **MCCIA Bible Study 2018:**

### **'The Peaceable Kingdom in the City'** Matthew 5–7: The Sermon on the Mount

The third study in this series was held on Wednesday 17 October, led by the Rev. Carolyn Francis (Collins Street Baptist Church). The focus was on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), and looked at Jesus' account of how to make the Peaceable Kingdom a reality today.

Carolyn reminded us of the strangeness and apparent impossibility of the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah's vision, while noting how deeply attractive it is. She also reminded us of Habakkuk's complaint that this vision is constantly set aside by the violence and injustice of so much of our world. The vision is great, but neither Isaiah nor Habakkuk provide clear means of reaching it. She then suggested that we look at the Sermon on the Mount as providing ways to make this vision real. The sermon itself begins with Jesus seeing the crowd, going up the mountain, sitting down and waiting for the disciples to come to him. This provides a context of committed listening by the disciples.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes, which are expressed through the Greek word 'makarios'. We are used to the translation of this word as 'blessed', but Carolyn proposed that we get closer to the sense of it using the English word 'honoured'. Palestinian society in the time of Jesus dealt in honour and shame. The beatitudes can be read as a transvaluation of values, honouring groups that are not generally honoured. This does indeed function as a means of achieving proper relationships between groups of unequal power and status in society.

The rest of the Sermon on the Mount proved too various and numerous in topics for detailed analysis, though the love of enemies, the rejection of judgement of others and the Golden Rule clearly echo facets of the Peaceable Kingdom. There is, in Jesus' teaching, an attention to inner sincerity (prayer before God, turning away from worrying) as an important contributor to outer harmony.

Discussion began with the issue of fasting. The main point made by Jesus is the hypocrisy of fasting to be seen by other people rather than as a way of turning to God. This is parallel to the giving of alms, where again, the main point is to honour a loving motivation and to shame the motivation of using these activities to seek to be honoured by society.

The other main focus of discussion was in response to a question about how we should respond to the homeless people begging on our streets. The one clear point made in response to the question was to recognise the call to honour the homeless as fellow human beings.

The study concluded with a recognition that there was much further work required to cover the questions raised by this study.

Notes by Sandy Yule

19-10-2018

## MCCIA Bible Study 2018:

### 'The Peaceable Kingdom in the City'

Habakkuk

The second MCCIA Bible study for 2018 was led by myself [Rev. Dr Sandy Yule], so let me present the view of the book that we considered together with my subsequent thoughts (mainly to include reflections on Chapter 3). Habakkuk is best read as a unified and poetic statement that wrestles with the incompatibility of the Hebrew understanding of God and the realities of world history. The unity the book becomes apparent when the vision (mentioned, but not clarified, at 2:2) is identified as that presented in Isaiah 11:1-9, of God's Messiah inaugurating the peaceable kingdom (our first study). This view is supported by the quotation of Isaiah 11:9 at Habakkuk 2:14.

There is little consensus among scholars about the date and authorship of the book of Habakkuk. While many dates have been proposed, it is most plausibly located in the time of Jeremiah, around the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians (or 'Chaldeans'). We don't know whether this text was composed by a single author at one point in time or whether it was put together by a community effort over time, with accretions and a final editor.

The text presents the journey of discernment of the prophet, from incomprehension at the apparent triumphs of the wicked over the righteous in our world when God is 'in charge', to an actual resolution, though obscure.

#### Outline

- \*Complaint: 'O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?' (Habakkuk 1:1-5)
- \*Answer: 'I am rousing the Chaldeans'. (1:6-11)
- \*Renewed complaint: 'Why .. [are you] silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?' (1:12-17)
- \*No answer: So the prophet waits. (2:1)
- \*Answer: 'Write the vision' (2:2-5)
- \*Renewed view of 'the wicked' as ripe for downfall: Shall not everyone taunt such people, and with mocking riddles, say about them..?' (2:6a)
- \*Woes to the wicked, the oppressors, exploiters and idolaters in Judah and beyond (2:6b-19)
- \*Final situation: 'But the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him'. (2:20)
- \*Habakkuk's prayer: 'O Lord .. revive [your great work]' (3:1-2)
- \*The greatness of God's works: (3:3-15)
- \*Habakkuk's acknowledgement of his own weakness: (3:16)
- \*Response of faith: 'Though the fig tree does not blossom .. yet I will rejoice in the Lord' (3:17-18)
- \*Outcome: 'God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights' (3:19)

The message is that we should hold fast to faith in God, despite the agonizing delay and the humiliating oppression. The righteous should live by this faith. Power seized by violence will not last. 'The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea' (2:14, compare Isaiah 11:9).

Our third study on Wednesday 17 October will be led by the Rev. Caroline Francis on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), looking for connections with the vision in Isaiah of the peaceable kingdom and with our lives in 'the city'.

Sandy Yule  
6-9-2018

## **MCCIA Bible Study 2018:**

### **'The Peaceable Kingdom in the City'**

Isaiah 11:1-9

This series of three bible studies kicked off on Wednesday 25 July, looking at the vision of the peaceable kingdom in Isaiah 11:1-9. The venue was the Welsh Church and the study was led by Dr Janina Hiebel, Lecturer in Old Testament at Yarra Theological Union. Dr. Hiebel introduced us to the debate about the historical setting for this text, supporting the view that the probable context is the situation of Israel and Judah in the eight century BCE, and more specifically, the aftermath of the Syro-Ephraimitic war against the Assyrians, in which Judah did not support Israel/Ephraim.

Turning to the actual text, the shoot coming out of the root of Jesse probably refers to the promise of new leadership for the kingdom of Judah, following the damage caused by the Assyrians (symbolically described at the end of chapter ten) and the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem from the Assyrian army. So the kingdom of Judah has a future, unlike the kingdom of Israel and also Aram. This promised king has the spirit of the Lord resting on him. The details of verses two to five present the ideal godly ruler who will bring forth justice and peace. Verses six to nine then present the reconciliation achieved by the ideal ruler in terms of harmonious relationships between the natural enemies of the animal kingdom (and symbolically also between human oppressors and oppressed).

This beautiful vision is clearly not a description of our contemporary world, so that we have found ways of accounting for the delay of the realization of this vision. Some hold it to be a continuing future hope for a messianic deliverer. Others regard it as an eschatological vision of the fullness of God's reign beyond human history. For others, this vision has begun to be realized in Jesus of Nazareth, thus showing the shape of the kingdom of God which he proclaimed and inaugurated. These harmonious relationships are the fruit of redemption from the evil forces which break and frustrate what should be our mutual and peaceful relationships. It was noteworthy that this very familiar passage did reveal some unexpected connections and implications in Dr. Hiebel's careful treatment.

The discussion of this passage began to look at how it might apply to our present lives in our city. We noted that the possibility of loving support for each other includes the hope that oppressors might turn from their domineering ways and that victims might recover their agency. The note of redemption from broken relationships in the passage was highlighted, not least in noting the progression in the pairing of the animals mentioned from unlikeness in maturity (wolf/lamb, leopard/kid) to likeness (cow/she-bear, lion/ox), to the point of the lion changing its diet! The passage concludes with the exclusion of evil and destruction from God's holy mountain because the earth is as full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. There is transformation of reality here, both collective, social reality and individual, personal reality.

The series will continue on Wednesday 5 September, looking at Habbakuk's reflection on the absence of fulfilment for this vision, and will conclude on Wednesday 17 October, looking at the Sermon on the Mount for echoes of this vision.

Notes by Sandy Yule

27-7-2018