

12th Nov 2020

Philemon 7-20 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

Psalm from 146 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,

whose hope is in the LORD their God,
who made heaven and earth,
the sea, and all that is in them;
who keeps faith for ever;
who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.

The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.
The LORD watches over the strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

The LORD will reign for ever,
your God, O Zion, for all generations.
Praise the LORD!

Luke 17:20-25 Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you.'

Then he said to the disciples, 'The days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. They will say to you, "Look there!" or "Look here!" Do not go, do not set off in pursuit. For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation.

Sermon: The little cut through, the alleyway, from the High Street in Witney to the car park at the back, known as Wesley Walk, is one of my favourite places in the middle of town. The Eden café is there, and is a particular treat for me to visit. Also there is Beanbag, the alternative healthcare store. And more recently the new shop Waste0 (*wastezero*) has appeared.

I'm sure most of you know that the Eden café specialises in vegan food and drinks, and as someone who occasionally ventures into the world of veganism I like to support their cause. Beanbag stocks all kinds of natural health products, which I much prefer to anything containing lots of chemicals. But my greater joy of all of these places in Wesley Walk has to be Waste0.

What you may not know is that the owners of Waste0 were originally engineers in Romania, and they came to Britain to work for the well-known company Aston Martin. But once here, they had a realisation, that the way we live life is not sustainable in the long term for our planet. That realisation turned into a vision, and that was for them to start retailing in environmentally sustainable ways. And so their shop Waste0 was created, and if you've not yet had an opportunity to discover them, now might be a good time, because they're managing to stay open during this time of a 2nd lockdown. Their motto: Refuse, Rethink, Reuse, Repurpose, Recycle. You can buy anything there from sacks of Shipton Mill flour to free range eggs to every kind of pasta or rice you can imagine, fresh fruit and veg, household cleaning materials, as well as natural products such as bamboo toothbrushes and real cotton nappies.

As to be expected, nothing is packaged up, everything is loose; you either take your own containers and fill them up, or you can use their paper bags: Refuse, Rethink, Reuse, Repurpose, Recycle!

I find it a rather funny coincidence that Waste0 is directly opposite the café called Eden: both places remind me of the ways we might avoid our continuing exploitation and damage to the world – and I wonder whether the owners of Waste0 have made the connection between themselves and the name of the Eden café opposite; I'll ask them next time I'm there! Our gradual and potential destruction of the planet and the alternative possibility of a return to a biblical Eden-like existence are in some small way held in check right there in Wesley Walk:

the remit God gave to his created humans was clearly to look after the earth and be responsible for its health, well-being, and productivity – these places, Eden café, Waste0 and Beanbag offer us a small but meaningful opportunity to individually contribute to the responsibility I believe God gave us.

You might by now be wondering what all this has to do with our Gospel and the Kingdom season we're now in. Well in our reading today, the Pharisees have asked Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming. Jesus replies: 'the kingdom of God is among you'. This answer by Jesus can of course be understood in all kinds of ways, and we don't have the time right now to explore all of those possibilities as to what he meant by that answer.

For now, I want us to think about how we can try and understand God's kingdom right now, right here, and how we live that out, hence making a connection with something we have right here in Witney - the Eden café, and the shop waste0 which I've just been describing. The owners of the shop have realised that it is now – not just at some point in the future – that we need to act, and to do whatever is possible to help protect and look after the world. Part of living in God's Kingdom as Christians in the here and now must surely be to act as though we are really that, we really are kingdom people, and a part of that is to do all we can to acknowledge and work with the responsibility we were given when God created us. Living as though we are God's kingdom right now, in this time, means working now to do everything we can to look after the earth and to hold our responsibility for its health and well-being.

This clearly is not an issue we can just sit back with and hope that others in authority will take the lead. All of us can embrace the need to play our part in the created order of God's kingdom.

What is the alternative if we don't try to do this? The alternative as I understand it is that we continue to wait and watch the world deteriorating and declining environmentally and then maybe in some kind of crazy panic when things have got far worse, try to claw back and restore all that is lost and in decay. We may well by then be far too late, and judgement will be upon us. Waiting and watching seems to me highly unsatisfactory and the problem by then of course will be even more mammoth than many experts in environmental studies are already telling us. Things will only go one way should we do nothing. The kingdom of God is among us – we are it, and with that comes responsibility.

The owners of waste0, it seems, aren't waiting for the further decline of our environment, but are addressing the issues right now. I'm aware that sceptics would say that these small scale efforts by relatively lone workers are nothing like big enough to have the impact which is required, but as so many environmentalists have already told us, if every one of us made even a small contribution to helping, then all of those small contributions add up to a much greater whole, and the collective impact is far greater than we may have individually imagined.

And so the café named Eden is well placed opposite Waste0. As said, the name Eden reminds us of our responsibilities within the created order. Is it possible then that each of us can contribute to the restoration of an Eden like existence, where care for the earth is of the highest priority?

I believe it is possible. We're inhabiting the kingdom of God right now and with that comes a God-given remit. John Mark Comer, in his book *Garden City*, would support this notion; God is looking for partners, Comer says, partners to work in his world – and in relation to caring for the planet, partners to promote in any way they can the more positive aspects of agriculture, farming and trade; we're not people who should be robbing and exploiting the earth of all of its goodness - but God's partners in helping the planet to thrive.

Sometimes it seems that to do this is a little more costly and expensive, and if you're someone who struggles with the idea of buying greener products or organic foods, because they can be more expensive, well here's a plug for yet one other organisation based in my favourite alleyway Wesley Walk;

four times a week the Witney Community Fridge based at the back of the Methodist Church gives away free food to whoever wants or needs it; this is food rejected or left over at the end of the day by supermarkets and other retailers, collected up by a group of volunteers, and then it magically appears in the Community Fridge in Wesley Walk for you to simply come and take. This is surely another way of inhabiting God's kingdom by trying to avoid unnecessary waste. Better that we make good use of these supermarket rejects rather than they simply go in the bin, or I'm told by my daughter who volunteers there, may be to the pigs.

And so the next time you read the words 'God's kingdom', instead of some typical ways of interpreting it in theological or somewhat distant ways, as though it is something always over there or out of reach, or something to do with living in eternity, maybe instead ground yourself in one of these really practical ways of being a part of that kingdom here and now – one of God's partners, looking after and cherishing the world he gave us. Amen.