

SERMON - 30/08/2020

Jesus offers us the Kingdom of God

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May the word of God be spoken and heard. Amen.

The Kingdom of God is a metaphor. It's a way of speaking about God's will and God's way, God's purpose and plan in human life.

The expression "the Kingdom of God" has its origins in the Hebrew Scriptures, our Old Testament. If you read through those Scriptures – the historical writings, the Psalms and the prophets – God is often referred to as the King of Israel. And in many places God is spoken of as Lord and King of all the earth.

From a contemporary point of view we might feel uneasy about 'the kingdom of God' as an image because it is very male-centric. But that image of kingship, which came so readily to the minds of the Israelites, is not principally about maleness, it's about authority – it's about God's rule and God's reign.

And yet there is also something important that is personal in this image of a king and a kingdom. In ancient times the king was a dispenser of justice, and you could go even as far as the king to seek a fair ruling.

God's kingship, so to speak, is not just about God's power to rule or God's authority to reign over God's people. It says something about God's justice and God's personal interest in God's people, God's world. It implies the people's belonging and loyalty to God and God's righteous and ethical action towards God's people. There's a heart connection between the best monarch and that monarch's people just as there is between God and God's people.

Even in our day, you only have to think of how some people feel about Queen Elizabeth, and the service she has given to the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, to realise that a monarch can be genuinely loved.

So this concept of God as King of Israel and Lord of all was a very strong and consistent one throughout the history of Israel and down to Jesus' time.

And it was probably even stronger when the people of Israel were ruled by bad kings or by foreign powers such as the Roman Empire.

Israel at the time of Jesus was really suffering from the rule of the Romans, who took whatever they could get from their occupation of Israel.

And there was corruption among the local rulers and the religious authorities in Jerusalem as well

The society was a mess and people were really poor and oppressed.

They longed for a Messiah – a ruler who the prophets said would come from the family line of King David and bring to Israel the justice and righteousness of God's own kingdom.

Into this context of oppression and the people's longing for something better, Jesus came. His first message to the people of Israel was, "Repent, for the kingdom of God has come near."

When he said this, the atmosphere must have been electric. What did Jesus mean? What was he going to do?

First, what did Jesus mean by “the kingdom of God coming near”?

I think he was saying that even in those difficult times of struggle and poverty and hardship, anyone could reach out to God. His statement was an indication that things could be totally different right now. Even under the Romans’ oppressive rule, or the daily challenge of getting enough to eat, the kingdom of God could develop and grow. People were free to repent, to change their priorities, and to give their heart and mind and life to God. They were being invited into the Kingdom. Through Jesus it had come that close.

And what was Jesus going to do?

Jesus was going to model the kingdom and live by its values. Through his words and his actions he was going to make the kingdom real in others’ experience as well as his own. And ultimately, he would give his life so that the Kingdom of God would come in all its fullness to anyone who follows Christ and his way.

Today’s Gospel reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew. Matthew had the highest reverence for God and God’s name. So instead of talking about the Kingdom of God, Matthew typically changes this to “the Kingdom of Heaven”.

The two expressions mean exactly the same thing.

The reading itself is known as the Beatitudes, Jesus’ surprising description of various types of people who are truly blessed. In the popular theology of Jesus’ day, normally people who were rich and powerful and influential were thought of as being blessed by God. And by implication the poor and struggling were thought of as not being blessed.

This was theology written by the ‘haves’. They excluded the have-nots from blessing.

But Jesus’ very first words in today’s passage from Matthew’s Gospel are “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

And Jesus goes on, “Blessed, are those who mourn.... Blessed are the meek....

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

He even says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake....”

What does Jesus mean?

I don’t think he means that people should seek to be poor in spirit or persecuted.

He doesn’t want us to be eager for opportunities to mourn and grieve.

And I don’t think Jesus means that it is not important if people are poor or mourning or persecuted. It does absolutely matter. God cares about the suffering we go through.

What Jesus is saying is that the kingdom of God starts anywhere, and particularly among the poor in spirit, the meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

That is why they are truly blessed

It needs to be said that the Gospel of Luke's version of this passage is expressed in much more material terms than Matthew's more spiritual version. Where Matthew has "the poor in spirit", Luke has just "the poor". Where Matthew has "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness", Luke just has, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst."

But we don't need to spend too long making a distinction. So often the poor are the poor in spirit. They are often hungry. Too often they are forced to be meek, they are persecuted and excluded.

From the start of his ministry, Jesus has the vision that the kingdom of God is for the ordinary people, not just for special achievers or the approved and righteous. It is for anyone in any circumstance. It is for you and me. And if there is anyone we don't approve of, it is for that person as well. We are all equal in this respect. The kingdom of God is open to us, but it's not specially or solely open to us.

One of the things that the Beatitudes remind us of is that typically when we are more in need, then we are more open to the help that God offers us. The Message version of the Bible says it this way: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule."

But we shouldn't take from this that God or Jesus in any way approves of poverty or want. In fact, as God's kingdom grows in people's hearts and in their communities, that is when we see social provision and extra care and support for those in need – precisely because of the kingdom value that everybody is important and loved by God.

You and I are invited into the kingdom of God through Jesus. We are invited to enter into relationship with the God of all things – to experience God's love towards us and to love God in return. We are invited to grow as citizens of the kingdom, to nurture God's life in us and act in our community in ways that demonstrate the values of the kingdom.

This is God's purpose for us and for our world, which is why Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Your will be done. Your kingdom come."  
So may God's kingdom come more and more – in us and through us. Amen.