

Sunday 13th June 2021

The Kingdom of God

Rev Paul Day

Mark 4:26-34
Ezekiel 17:22-end

A number of people from our congregations are taking part in the Pilgrim course at the moment. In the course we are looking at the familiar words of the Lord's Prayer. Words we say every week, perhaps even every day. Maybe several times. Words that for most of us are ingrained in our memories.

I shared the story of how on several occasions, when taking a service in a care home, I have noticed people who seem to be unaware of what is going on; taking no part. And yet when we get to the Lord's Prayer they join in. The familiar words, etched deep in their minds, enable them to participate and enter into God's presence. Just as we sometimes talk of thin places, perhaps these are thin words.

And yet we do well to look carefully at them, to study them and appreciate their true meaning. Because the problem with familiar words is that we say them without thinking. It's worth reminding ourselves that Jesus used what has become known as the Lord's Prayer to teach his disciples how to pray so that (as it says in Matthew's gospel) *you do not heap up empty phrases*.

So the Pilgrim course is helping us explore what the Lord's Prayer is all about. And in our session a week or so back we were looking at the phrase :

Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven

So what exactly is the Kingdom of God. We pray for it to come in the Lord's Prayer – but what are we anticipating, what are we hoping for, what are we praying for?

A lot of the teaching of Jesus, particularly in what are known as the synoptic gospels - Matthew, Mark and Luke - is about the Kingdom of God. But much of what he says is in the form of parables, stories, illustrations. The Kingdom of God is like ...a mustard seed, seed growing in a field (as in today's reading from Mark), yeast, treasure in a field and so on. Sometimes this might seem a little frustrating – why doesn't he just say what he means – but I think he feels we learn more from trying to work things out for ourselves, to think about how the various pictures work together.

So today we will try to dig a little deeper, and to see not just what the Kingdom of God is, but what it means for us as Christians as we try to live out our faith in a world that seems so far away from what God wants.

What is the Kingdom of God?

We are citizens of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. And we are a Kingdom because we have a monarch – in our case a Queen (so perhaps we should really be a Queendom). France, for example is known as the Republic of France – France of course has no King or Queen. Great Britain and Northern Ireland is where our Queen's authority is recognised. That authority may be devolved to parliament, but it ultimately rests with her.

So when we talk of the Kingdom of God we see that it is where God is King and where his authority is recognised. We cannot begin thinking about the Kingdom of God without thinking about God as King, without thinking about him having authority.

As we have seen, the Lord's Prayer asks us to pray *Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*. Here there is an acknowledgement that God's Kingdom is already a reality in Heaven – that in heaven his authority is recognised. Our prayer is that that becomes true on earth as well.

But what does that mean? What would it mean to see God's rule a reality on earth? What would it mean if God's authority were recognised on earth?

It would mean surely that everything on earth would be as God would want it to be. The Old Testament creation stories talk of a world that was created perfect in God's eyes – in other words created just as he wanted it to be. But the stories go on to show how things began to go wrong. People made bad choices, selfish choices, unloving choices and soon the whole world was out of kilter with what God had intended. That much is clear whether or not we hold to the historical reality of those early Old Testament stories.

Praying for God's Kingdom to come on earth is therefore praying for that state of perfection to be restored, for everything to be as God had intended. And this means a world where what happens reflects the characteristics of God.

That hymn we have just sung helps us as we think about what those characteristics are:

Justice, joy, mercy and grace.

Justice – everyone and everything being cared for and treated with equal respect. A world where there is no great divide between those with and those without, a world where people are not judged according to race, colour, sexuality or whatever. A world where people can reach their full potential. A world where the creation is treated justly and carefully.

Joy – not some superficial happiness but a deep rooted contentment. A world where envy and jealousy have no place. A world where people desire the common good rather than selfish ends. A world where the creation is nurtured rather than exploited.

Mercy and grace – a world where forgiveness is the norm. A world where we are defined by our potential for the future rather than by our actions in the past. A world where the generous love of God is the driving force and example for everything.

And the hymn goes on to talk about challenge and choice. The Kingdom would be a world where right and wise choices would be the norm, a world where difficulties are faced up to with the help of God and challenges met with his wisdom and strength. A world where God not only has authority but also gives inspiration and guidance to all.

That then gives a glimpse into what the Kingdom of God might be like. We might be tempted to write it off completely as being wishful thinking and practically impossible. The truth is surely that it will never completely become a reality, but that shouldn't stop us working towards such a Kingdom. And this is what Jesus talks about in his parables.

The church can be thought of as a community or a family as we heard last week seeking to live "Kingdom lives", lives that recognise the authority of God – we might say a community living to see God's dream come true for the world. And in a moment we will have a look at how that might happen, what it means for you and for me.

How does it happen?

This is where Jesus' parables help us – particularly the two we are looking at today.

The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed. The seed sprouts and grows, but the sower doesn't know how. Perhaps the how of the Kingdom is beyond our understanding. We play our part and trust God to use what we do to achieve something greater.

It reminds me of Philip Henslowe's line in the film Shakespeare in Love.

Henslowe is the promoter putting on one of Shakespeare's plays; he is in conversation with the man with the money – Mr Fennyman. Everything seems to be stacked against the play happening; the Master of the Revels has closed the playhouses, surely the play cannot go on.

Hugh Fennyman : So what do we do?
Philip Henslowe: Nothing. Strangely enough, it all turns out well.
Hugh Fennyman : How?
Philip Henslowe: I don't know. It's a mystery.

And perhaps the other parable sheds a little more light. The kingdom is like a mustard seed. A tiny seed that grows into something huge. It's not big plans, schemes or projects that do the work of ushering in the Kingdom. It's the small things that grow perhaps imperceptibly

into huge plants. The Ezekiel reading tells the same story but makes it plain that behind it all is God. The mystery behind it is God himself.

And this is of course can be a great encouragement to us. Whatever small things we do make a real contribution. Every deed of justice, every moment of joy, every act of mercy, every wise choice, every challenge we meet well – they all contribute to the Kingdom.

We pray for the Kingdom to come and, like so many prayers, the prayer will only be answered if we ourselves are willing to be part of the answer. If our lives are changed, our desires and hopes motivated by our love and obedience to God.

If we look to God in every decision we make, every action we take and every word we speak. If we model our lives upon him.

A few years ago many young Christians wore bracelets with the initials WWJD on them. What would Jesus Do. A simple question we can ask ourselves when we are unsure of what to do or say. What would Jesus do? We may not always get it right, but we will slowly become more attuned to God's desires.

But the danger of all this, as we thought about in Reflective Worship last Sunday, is that it all becomes down to our effort. We must try harder, we must do more, we berate ourselves when we don't manage it. But as we said at Reflective Worship if we ensure our relationship with God in Jesus is strong and healthy, his Spirit within us will help us live the way he wants. We will be changed into being the people God wants us to be. It's about tapping into the strength and energy of God rather than struggling on ourselves.

That hymn we have just heard – For the healing of the nations – sums up what we are taking these small steps towards, what God will bring about through people like you and me.

A just and equal sharing, love in action, people being freed from despair, peace replacing war, harmony replacing conflict, life being lived in its fullness and us all slowly growing into Christ's likeness. Let us never stop praying those words *Thy Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven* and let us never stop becoming the answer to our own prayer.