

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

A key to what we are on about as Christians is this understanding of the kingdom of heaven. We read about it all through the gospels, but surprisingly it isn't talked about in the same terms outside of them. It's interchangeable with the phrase kingdom of God, and Jesus talks about it all the time.

The phrase "Kingdom of heaven" is used 32 times and only in Matthew, whereas kingdom of God is used 63 times in the New Testament, 14 times outside the Gospels. So most of the teaching about the kingdom of heaven is in the stories about Jesus and what he said to us. It's interesting that it's such a major theme for Jesus and not for Paul, Peter and John in their letters.

But the thing is that the kingdom of heaven is an important part of the "good news" which is fine, but my problem that it is a phrase that is vague and doesn't have a lot of meaning for us today.

For example, the idea of kingdom is lost on us today. Most of us here tonight have only ever known a democratic system. Few of us have been under a monarchy in the sense that the New Testament writers understood.

When we go to see the Queen we don't go on pain of death or even fear of death. In fact we openly mock the monarchy in tabloids. They are more of a social plaything for us than anything—some people make quite a tidy living in exposing their secrets! Any power that the monarchy has is perceptual, appeals to popular emotions and fancies, but it cannot actually enforcing power behind it. The Queen no longer has the power to chop off your head. The Queen didn't send the forces to Iraq, Tony Blair did.

So what do we know about kingdoms? What do we know about sovereignty except that which we learn from history?

But to add to our ignorance is the idea that the idea of the kingdom of heaven has one of those pesky tensions built into it. There is a sense where the kingdom of heaven is something that we look forward to, the time when Jesus will reign definitively over creation once again. But there is also a sense where we participate in the kingdom of heaven now. As Christians we are part of this kingdom of heaven that is already here, but we look forward to the future when we realise the 'not yet' happening. It's here now, but only in part. It will be fully here in the future.

So, what is it? When John the Baptist and Jesus shout out “repent the kingdom of heaven is near” what is it that he was actually saying? Why repent? What is the kingdom of heaven? How is it that we can lock into what Jesus was talking about here?

I’m going to hand out some little sayings about the kingdom of heaven from the Gospel of Matthew and we can get into some small groups and talk about them. What does the analogue mean?

The kingdom of heaven is something precious, something that we would give all we have for. It is something that begins small and becomes greater. It is something we look forward to, and it is something that is already here.

Contrary to what some of us may believe it is not another term for the church. It’s actually a reflection of the state of us and our interaction with the world. It is not a group of people gathered in the name of Jesus, rather it is when those people are doing the *work* of Jesus. The kingdom of heaven is what we are when we are out there. It is practical result of what we are in here. It is when we become all these things that we often talk about, salt, light, servanthood . . . it’s the true test of loving your neighbour. It is the true test of loving your enemy. It is the true test of turning the other cheek. Basically, the kind of living that we see Jesus talking about in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 6. The kingdom of heaven is a kingdom of God’s love.

Sounds good doesn’t it. So I thought I might remind us of the wonderfulness of this kingdom of God. Because it *is* good news.

The disciples were just standing around one day, it was the first time they were together as a group and Jesus said that they were the only men he was going to choose. They were his official disciples. They were an unlikely band of men, from all sorts of walks of life and they were just chatting amongst themselves getting to know each other. The one called Judas had organised the icebreaker, something to do with having the name of an animal stuck to your back and you had to find out what animal you were by asking yes no questions. Anyway, it didn’t go down too well but it didn’t matter because it still gave a starting point for conversation. So they stood around eating their finger food and sipping on punch,

trying awkward stop start conversations with each other and waiting for Jesus was to make some kind of announcement.

And Jesus called the meeting to order—much to Matthew’s pleasure, he was the wealthiest by far and couldn’t stand the smell of this fisherman he was talking to called Peter. Everybody seemed to breath a sigh of relief as they relaxed out of their tense ‘get to know you’ conversations.

Jesus started to give some instructions to the twelve disciples about what they were going to do for the next few months and I think they felt pretty good about it. It looked like a good strategy for evangelism, something that churches like, strategic planning. Here’s how it went.

Jesus said, “Ok guys, good to see you all here. I’ve chosen you to be my disciples and you are in for quite a ride. Today we start what I’ve gathered you for.” The boys were getting excited—some even smiled. “Some of you have seen my miracles and most of you have heard my preaching, now it’s your turn.

“Don’t go to anyone else except for towns in our Israel. We’re not ready to look further than that right now. And simply yell this out at the top of your voice “Good news! Good news! The kingdom of heaven is near!

“Grab their attention and start healing their sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and cast out demons! That’s right perform these miracles alongside the message of the good news!”

The disciples were gob-smacked. Was he really saying that they could go out and do all these amazing things? Just go into the village of Pokeno and raise a dead person back to life? And they thought about how Jesus had told the wind to calm down on the lake that day so long ago, and how Jesus had already raised a girl to life and healed a woman from a terrible bleeding disorder and caused some blind men to see and they had watched him cast out demons! They had seen Jesus do all this and now he wanted them, these ordinary guys, to do the same? Could they really?

And a buzz descended upon them all. Suddenly they all felt more at ease with each other . . .

Jesus continued, “Don’t take any money with you or any change of clothes. Live on faith—you’ll get fed.”

The disciples let them slide thinking they could negotiate that part of the contract later.

“Find out who wants to hear the message, hang out with them until you feel it’s time to move on. Don’t be shy for you have the good stuff here, ok you are the ones who hold all the cards because you are telling the good news. But if they’re not interested, don’t waste any time on them. They have dug their own graves if they reject your message.

“Remember Sodom and Gomorrah? Do you remember what happened there? How the cities were consumed by a fire from heaven? Yeah, well that’s nothing compared to what will happen to people who reject the message about the kingdom of heaven.”

The disciples looked blankly at each other and hesitantly shrugged their shoulders. “Don’t you think that’s a bit over the top Jesus? Don’t you think you’re being a little bit harsh? I mean surely it’s up to them . . . and well . . . our news isn’t that great is it?”

“Sure the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Nice, it means that we’re finally going to rid ourselves of these Romans. Cool. It means we’re going to be prosperous as a nation once again. It means that God is going to work visibly in our community to heal the sick both physically and spiritually. These are all good things. But if they don’t want to hear it, then maybe they’re just not ready for it and maybe we should keep the doors open a bit. Let’s not burn our bridges. Maybe we don’t need to be quite so ‘in your face’ about the whole deal. Don’t you think that it’s a bit harsh to close the doors on them through being so judgemental? I think your strategy needs modifying a bit Jesus.”

Well, Jesus continued. And it really sucked.

“You see guys, I’m sending you out like sheep into a pack of wolves. Think about that. Have your wits about you and keep yourselves righteous. Beware of the people you are going to. They will take you to their pop-cultural leaders and their politicians, and you will be flogged. You will be shamed. You will be ridiculed. You will have no reputation except for being a religious fanatic and a fool.”

“Eh? What the hey?” The disciples were no longer nibbling on their *hors d’oeuvres*, they were no longer making smart remarks to each other under their breath. Their excitement quickly dissipated into a void of confusion.

“This is madness! How on earth can this message about the kingdom of heaven be good news if people are going to tear me to shreds for preaching it?” They couldn’t believe

their ears. So they could now perform miracles, but people would get upset about that? Jesus strategy really needed work because at the moment it was obviously just going to upset people.

And we might find our own set of excuses here. We might find ourselves all too aware of the fact that we are not really appreciated by the people out there who are not Christians. So we take on the mantle of having to be PC. We take on the mantle of how we need to tolerate other people's opinions. We are afraid of being ridiculed. In fact we may not even like people to know we are Christians. I know that for a fact.

But we don't like to be ridiculed, which is why we can be good Christians here in these walls or at home group or at youth group. Jesus had no misunderstandings that the gospel, the good news, the teaching about God's love was going to be negative for many people.

Listen to the rest of this speech.

These are huge words. These are what the disciples were appointed to do.

What do we learn from this exercise tonight? I think one thing we learn that as Christians we need to be more interested in being acceptable to God than being acceptable to people. And this is a harsh teaching, but we are called to be radicals in this society. We are not meant to be covert operators, but overt proclaimers. We are meant to be the voice of the poor, the helpers of the oppressed, the examples of God inspired love. We are the hands of Jesus, the good news, we are the ones who need to weigh up the cost of following Jesus.

Will we sell all we have and give it to the poor? It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to have a handle on the kingdom of God?

And this is where I have to stop preaching. This just seems too hard. I haven't sold everything I've got and given it to the poor. Who has? What hope have we got then?

The kingdom of heaven is a work in progress. We are the holders of the truth, the gospel that will set people truly free. We are the ones who participate in this kingdom of heaven and we are the ones who are the light of the world. We are this whether we like it or not.

Whether we are committed to the cause or not committed to the cause we still tell people what we think about the cause through our actions. Either by our enthusiasm or apathy, all we who call ourselves Christian represent the kingdom values to those who don't know. Even the fact that some of you are here instead of watching New Zealand idol tells a story to those who ask if you saw it.

If our faith is dead, stagnated and weathered by cynicism, burn out or fear—we still make a statement it's just not a good one. But if we engage with the sermon on the mount and let the rule of life “love God and love people” be the thing we strive for then we start to show what this faith is about—we show people a light and give people an understanding of the good news. And it may upset people, but at least we are shining a light in an otherwise dark world. If we live like this then we will live life to the full.

And the challenge then is laid bare. The Kingdom of God is near! And the issue for your faith. Dead or alive, what'll it be?

If you want to make your stand, if you want to start afresh then go to the bottom of the cross and light a candle and grab a packet of salt. Take the salt away with you and let it remind you how you are the salt of the earth. Think about the candle and see that you are the light of the world. There's not too many up there, so only do it if you think it's important for you to do. Don't just go with the flow. Dead or alive? What will you be?