

PODCAST: WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF GOD? (1)

Jesus said that 'whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' (Mark 10.15). Here's a story of a child who had received the kingdom without knowing it.

A little girl was suffering from a rare form of blood disease. Her only hope was to receive a blood transfusion from someone with exactly the same blood type as hers. After testing various members of the girl's family, it was discovered that her ten year old brother had a precise match. The doctor talked to him and gently raised the possibility of his providing a transfusion for his sister. 'Your sister is dying,' he explained, 'but your blood would be able to save her. Are you willing to give your blood?' The boy hesitated for a moment, and the doctor saw that he was anxious at the prospect. But the lad agreed to the process. After the transfusion the doctor went to visit the brother to see how he was. 'Tell me,' implored the boy, 'how long until I die?' Only then did the doctor realise his young patient's misunderstanding, and know that he had been willing to give his life so that his sister might live.'

That little lad had received the Kingdom of God without knowing it. So let's look a little closer at what the Kingdom of God really is.

The Kingdom of God has to be at the heart of our lives as Christians because it was the key category of Jesus' teaching. It was his constant, central message, and offered a new, liberating framework for religion both then and now. Mark 1.14,15 gives the clearest, most succinct description of his message. 'After John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.' So – the time is now, the kingdom is here, change how you approach life. And at the centre of those three phrases the actual content of the message is the kingdom.

When Jesus went back to see his family in Nazareth, having set up home with Peter's family in Capernaum, he preached a dynamic sermon in the synagogue, quoting Isaiah 61 as his manifesto for a new order. It was 'good news for the poor, release for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4.18,19). He expanded on this royal charter in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. *This is why he came.* It wasn't just to 'save souls'; it was to proclaim a new world order which he called the kingdom of God.

Jesus then constantly illustrated what that meant. His parables repeatedly started 'The kingdom of heaven is like...' (see, for example, Matthew 13). He approached his central theme from a variety of angles and used a wide range of everyday images (seed, a lost coin, buried treasure, a fine pearl, a fishing net, a wayward son) but always the image of the kingdom of God (or of heaven) was set before his hearers as the gift that he uniquely brought.

Our task, therefore, as followers of this Kingdom-Jesus, is constantly to describe and illustrate what it's like to be part of this kingdom. In a myriad of ways we're inviting people to enter this kingdom, explore it, and live out its values.

Too often the Church has offered sub-standard versions of the good news of the kingdom. Here are some, in exaggerated form. The kingdom is about (they say):

- *Sin management and an evacuation plan.* On this account, the good news is about dealing with our multiple wrongdoings. Our problem is personal sin, but Jesus died for us and his death does away with our guilt, so we can be rewarded with heaven as our eternal destination.
- *Behaviour modification and a self-help programme.* We get into a mess in all sorts of ways, but Jesus has given us new laws to obey and the Church is here to encourage or enforce them. Certain standards are necessary to continue to carry a membership card for the Christian club.
- *'God will fix things for me.'* It's rarely put as crudely as this but there is a belief that if I do right by God, jump through the right hoops, believe the right things and behave the right way, God will make sure bad things don't happen to me. A close relative of this belief is another: 'Everything happens for a reason,' so if things go wrong in my life I must have stepped off the golden path, a belief that has caused untold emotional and spiritual damage.

It's noticeable that in these parodies-with-enough-truth-to-cause-alarm the reference point for the good news is always personal. It's another version of the 'Big Me' problem of our society where everything is about my personal welfare and well-being. Our churches are inevitably contaminated too.

A much better starting point for the Kingdom is to listen to Bishop Michael Curry who preached at the wedding of Harry and Meghan:

'Imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families where love is the way. Imagine neighbourhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce where this love is the way. Imagine this tired old world where love is the way. When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside, to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty good room - plenty good room - for all of God's children.'

That's a pretty fair description of the kingdom of God.

It's a big picture of course, but you wouldn't expect God's vision to be anything less. It's the big picture of how things should, and could, really operate. Most people want their lives to have significance and be part of a larger framework of meaning and purpose. We want something more than our small lives, soft, overfull and passive. Jesus' invitation was to a larger field of significance and purpose, and he called it the kingdom of God. Our invitation ultimately in ministry, alarming as it may sound, can be no less.

Tomorrow I want to look at what the Kingdom of God means in both personal and social terms.

See you then.