

## UNMASKING THE KINGDOM OF GOD

Most of us are no strangers to masks.

When I was a youngster and we'd just got a television, it seemed as if westerns were on the box every night. Rawhide, Bonanza, The Lone Ranger. You remember? The Lone Ranger was a bit eccentric of course because he masked his eyes rather than his nose and mouth. But then he was also prone to strange enthusiasms like shouting, 'Hi, ho, Silver, away!' (I always felt sorry for Tonto.) But the regular cowboys and the bandits (there were always plenty of them) - they all knew how to whip on a mask if they were coping with swirling dust (cowboys) or robbing a bank (bandits).

These masks were all good fun when I was a kid. But it's serious now. We're all going to have to get used to masks.

Of course masks protect, but they also confuse. They disguise people's identity - that's why the bandits wore them, and the young protesters in Hong Kong and the United States. Masks on people prevent you being quite sure of who or what you're seeing. There's an element of hiddenness, of mystery behind a mask.

in Old Testament times unmarried women were masked, or at least veiled. And God was veiled too, hidden on Mount Sinai in cloud and thunder, or shrouded in incense in the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

God himself was masked.

But Jesus did away with all that. He was God unmasked. He was God front-on, full strength, or as much as a human being could contain of God without blowing a fuse. Jesus was committed to opening doors, revealing the truth, setting people free, calling out injustice and oppression of the poor. His ministry was about unmasking the truth.

And that's where today's gospel reading comes in, because here we have a whole succession of parables as Jesus unmask the truth of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom had been a rather shadowy concept before Jesus came along. It wasn't much used as a key descriptor of God's purposes. Nor, to be honest, was it much used after Jesus - mainly because people started talking less about the Kingdom and more about the King - Jesus himself.

But for Jesus, the Kingdom is what his whole teaching and healing and living and dying was all about. Bringing in the new age, the age of peace and justice and right relationships. A world where love is the way. Jesus was unmasking the Kingdom.

So all these parables start by saying 'The Kingdom of God/of heaven is like this' A mustard seed that starts tiny and grows phenomenally; minute particles of yeast that mix with flour and end up able to feed over a hundred people; treasure found unexpectedly in a field; a pearl to dazzle all pearls discovered by an eager merchant, and so on.

Jesus was saying the Kingdom of heaven is hidden in, behind and amongst everything. God is at work everywhere, pressing creation to its furthest potential. And that includes us - the

Kingdom of God is to be found *within* us, Jesus says. So look for it! Unmask it! Recognise it! Sell your house for it! The Kingdom of God is in bud all around you – don't miss it! That was the message of these parables.

So, is it? Is the Kingdom in bud everywhere? Are you aware of this new creation, this Kingdom of peace and justice and right relationships, this world where love is the way – are you aware of it growing in our midst? Or is the jury still out?

A rabbi was once teaching a class and a student asked him, 'Christians say the Messiah has already come. What do you think?' The rabbi went to the window and looked down at the ordinary street below. Then he turned back and said, 'It doesn't look very much like it to me.'

Nor does it to most of us.

But that's where we need to let Jesus take the masks off *our* eyes too. Because, says Jesus, the Kingdom is already at work, well established and unstoppable. Wherever we see peace, justice, love, mercy, compassion, courage, forgiveness, grace – wherever we see these things getting a foothold, the Kingdom is coming.

Don't look for it just in church activities. God's building site for the Kingdom is the world. The church is just the contractor's hut on the edge of the building site. Jesus invites us to build a new world, not a more comfortable hut. OK – so where do we see the Kingdom coming?

This last week I was involved in a webinar for the Balfour Project which is committed to a fair political deal for Palestinians. Your Kingdom come with justice.

I spoke by Zoom at an international rally for the Iranian Opposition in Exile, seeking freedom for that troubled country. Your Kingdom come with hope.

We received, out of the blue this week, several phone calls and other messages asking after us, sending love and care and the promise of prayers. Your Kingdom come with kindness.

England won the second Test against the West Indies. Your Kingdom come with joy!

An American pastor was killed this week when he stopped to help a driver whose car had caught fire. He just had time to push the driver out of the way of the truck that killed him instead. Your Kingdom come with courage.

And so it goes on. The Kingdom unmasked. Millions of times a day all over the world the Kingdom is coming. The challenge of Jesus' parables, these little explosives in the soul, is to align ourselves with the ways of the Kingdom, to commit ourselves to be on the side of the Kingdom builders, the side of Jesus - and the mustard seed, the yeast, the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price.

In the Black Lives Matter protests a popular slogan is 'If you stay silent, you're part of the problem.' And if we don't intentionally sign up to build the Kingdom, then we're part of the problem too. God needs partners in the great project of shaping a new creation. OK, finally the coming of the Kingdom is in his hands, not ours, but in the short term he needs people

like us to lay the foundations. 'Your Kingdom come. Your will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven.' On earth means us. We're the agents of the Kingdom. We have to unmask the Kingdom.

St Ignatius in his Spiritual Exercises invites us to ask ourselves three needle-sharp questions: What have I done for Christ? What am I doing for Christ? What am I going to do for Christ?

Those questions ought to keep us busy this week.

That, and getting used to our masks.