

The Kingdom of God

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Gospel reading: Luke 9.51-62

Have you ever noticed that sometimes when you explain something to someone or ask a question you don't always get the response you were expecting, especially from children? There was a primary school visit here recently and some of the children were admiring the memorial book by the lady Chapel. One girl actually commented on the number of names there must be in such a big book and asked why they were there. The teacher answered that they were the names of all the people who had given their lives in the services. "Oh I see" she said sagely nodding her head. Then she frowned and said "which service, the 0800 or the 0930?"

There are some responses in the gospels that really don't seem in keeping with the good news message. Today's reading would appear to be one such example. Even if we ignore the rather violent suggestion of James and John to call down fire on the Samaritan village, it is difficult to overlook the rather unexpected responses of Jesus to new disciples.

One follower asks, probably as a matter of politeness, permission to bury his father before joining up with Jesus. He surely cannot have anticipated Jesus' response which is on the face of it frankly shocking "Let the dead bury their own dead"; but as for you go and proclaim the kingdom of God. In a similar vein, another asks to be allowed to say goodbye to his loved ones, but Jesus tells him "No-one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God". If you are ploughing a field and look back to see what you've done, you will mess up the straight line. i.e. don't look back look forward..... and "no, you can't say goodbye".

These words do not sound like the Jesus we have come to know. And we cannot simply write them off as Jesus having a bad day, and maybe feeling a bit grumpy. The clue is in the words 'the Kingdom of God'. All Jesus' teaching so far had been about the kingdom. From the first sermon in Mark 1.15 when we heard "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand" to the last sermon described in Acts 1.3 where he spoke to them "of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God". The words 'kingdom of God' appear over a hundred times in the four gospels. Just think how many of the parables

start “the kingdom of God is like....” But in amongst Jesus’ message of love and service have we even noticed that this is just part of the bigger “kingdom” message.

So perhaps we should try and work out what we think Jesus meant by it?

We should be aware that there were some major influences in the generation immediately preceding Jesus that are very relevant to our contemporary understanding of Kingdom. (I’ll come back to that in a moment). Whereas the Old Testament regularly referred to the kingdom as God’s dominion, the Roman subjugation brought the Jewish state very much down to earth with heavy taxation, a lack of material goods, food shortages, poverty and of course, a loss of freedom. The Jews, struggling to survive, increasingly became focussed on secular issues and spiritual matters took second place. The ‘kingdom of God’ became an aspiration synonymous with nationalism. The emphasis had shifted onto kingdom not God.

By the time Jesus came the nationalist spirit had never been stronger. Rome was the enemy hence the belief that the Messiah would be a warrior sweeping away the invader and through force, reclaiming their earthly kingdom and power.

But Jesus always maintained that it was a mistaken belief that the real enemy of the people was Rome. He argued consistently that it was a moral not a nationalistic battle. The wrong that people did to others, the exploitation of their own people, the religious class system designed to keep the poor down and feeling unworthy. These were the real issues, not the physical subjugation of a foreign power. Jesus never argued against Rome. Instead he healed broken spirits, casting out demons and restoring damaged lives, showing love and generosity to the poor and those spurned by society but above all making people believe in the power of God’s love for them. Jesus touched the hearts of all who saw or heard him.

Nevertheless, there were many who desperately clung to the idea that as his chosen people, God would restore them to the position of power and authority that they had once enjoyed bringing them wealth and the material benefits that would put them above other men.

But Jesus resisted and argued that the kingdom of God was not meat and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in God. In Luke 17 Jesus argues that “the kingdom cometh not with observation. It is within you”. And here we reach the central issue. The Jews could only dream of the kingdom. Jesus proclaimed that it was already here. In the synagogue at Nazareth when Jesus read Isaiah’s prophecy of the kingdom and then announced that “this day is this fulfilled in your ears” he almost provoked a riot. Standing in front of Pilate he confirmed that the kingdom “is not of this world”. But the message was not what they wanted to hear.

And here is the incredible irony of this situation. Pilate put Jesus to death because he could not run the risk of allowing any form of opposition or rival kingdom to be set up. The Jews wanted Jesus crucified because they desperately did want an earthly kingdom restored to them. The supreme irony is that on both counts setting up an earthly kingdom was the one thing that Jesus was not going to do.

Jesus continued throughout his mission to preach and demonstrate by example that the kingdom was here already. It could only be through love and trust in God, and a spirit of love and service for others that people with their spiritual vision and priorities restored would see it.

But even then, the kingdom would not be complete. Jesus also taught that the kingdom of God was alive in the world as well as the heart. It is a complimentary and natural progression. By broadening the kingdom's horizons, individual becomes society, local becomes global. "The field is the world" Jesus said in Matthew when explain the ground on which the gospel seed was sown. Naturally this globalisation of God was heretical to the Jews who not only harboured their nationalistic hopes but who also believed that as the 'chosen people' the kingdom was for them alone. As I said it was not an easy time to preach a spiritual kingdom.

.....and nor is it today. Jesus' message is as important in the contemporary world as it was when he was on earth. Nationalism, extremism, religious, racial and cultural prejudices have consistently scarred the path of history. But it is cyclical and is once again becoming a threat to world stabilisation. Increasingly, right wing elements are winning political and mob support across the world. Extremist organisations and individuals barely concealed under their political comfort blankets are campaigning under the banner of threats to national sovereignty. They claim popular support in seeking mandates to legitimise racial intolerance and prejudice. Only this week former PM Gordon Brown in an address to the anti-racism group Hope not Hate, spoke out against political "hijacking of patriotism" saying that "in jeopardy are both the unity and integrity of the united Kingdom and the shared values -tolerance, respect for diversity (and) being outward looking".

When National pride is used to create an isolationist and supremacist belief that one is better than others and that benefits should only accrue to select people, then Christian beliefs and values go out the window. When those tasked with running the political system lose sight of the people whom they are supposed to be serving or treat the office as a vehicle for their own promotion, trust and moral values break down and the environment is ripe for both apathy and extremism to take hold. Across Europe right wing parties are increasing in political power and mass popularity. It is frightening but also nothing new. Yet we still pay lip-service to and never seem to learn from the painful lessons of history; even in some cases denying they existed. Jesus' message of love

and service was inclusive of all nations. He taught, that we should work together and not stand alone opposed to any form of social, or cultural integration. It is easy to get caught up in the emotion and rhetoric that makes a case that others are taking what is 'rightfully ours'. Like the first century Jews the emphasis can quickly fall on 'kingdom' rather than God. The current political climate will challenge the very Christian core of our belief in a kingdom of God. With the political system in disarray, popularist politicians without any declared manifesto other than barely concealed racism become more powerful and even in established politics the closest supporters of the man tipped to be our next Prime Minister do not know what he will do or say when he gains office. We are heading for a dangerous and uncertain future.

Jesus sought to refocus our lives on the kingdom of God. He taught us that it lives in our hearts and we need to bring it into the world. Is it possible to put this on hold until we have got the best deal for ourselves? Jesus knew when he set his face on Jerusalem that it was going to be a long and painful journey to focus people back on the Kingdom of God. 2000 years later, it is not getting any easier.

Amen