

Thy Kingdom come

Matthew 13. 31-33, 45-52

“Thy Kingdom come” we will pray in most services. I wonder how many times you have prayed that. I did a bit of calculation, and came up with the fact that on Sundays alone, since I was ordained 55 years ago, I have prayed that ??? have a guess ??? – something over 6,700 times. That is a conservative estimate, because in the old Evensong services we said it twice, and I didn’t count the repeats!

So what are we praying? What is ‘Kingdom’ all about? Today’s Gospel has some pointers, and I will come to those in a bit. There is nothing specific and detailed about this prayer. It is a grandiose, sweeping statement about things in general. What a healthy thing that is! Because anything that we do pray about in detail has to be set against the main thrust of God’s message to us. Jesus dealt with the things which people around him needed: the food at the picnic meeting by the lakeside, the gynaecological problems of a woman in a crowd - but that wasn’t his message. Those were ways his message became real to people. What he went about saying was "The Kingdom is here, the Kingdom is at hand, the Kingdom is among you". Before we bring our own, or others’ very real personal and important needs to God, we must to put them in the context of God's overall purpose. The God who will listen to our petty petitions is the God who is leading his purpose on to the day when, in the prophet's words "the earth will be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea." So the movement is from thinking of God, to seeing how God relates to his whole creation, and then finally we can narrow down to specific things for others and ourselves. Do you recall how Jesus told his followers not to worry about food and clothing, but to trust God? He talks about how the flowers are better robed than Solomon in all his finery. Don't worry, he says - "set your hearts on his kingdom, and these other things will be given you as well."

Let’s look at what our Gospel reading has to say. There were four parables - often labelled as ‘parables of the kingdom’. The first two – the mustard seed and the yeast – are parables about growth. The mustard plant as it is known in the Middle East is very different from the version we have in Europe. It can grow to 12 or 15 feet in height. The seed actually isn’t the smallest in actual size, but it is a tiny seed, and proverbially, it was talked about like that. A tiny beginning, and a very large end result. Had Jesus lived in a world which knew more about human biology, he could have used the people around him as a similar example. At conception, you and I were so tiny we could only be seen under a microscope. We certainly don’t need a microscope to be seen now. But we are the same piece of life, as the mustard seed and the 12 foot bush was the same piece of life. It says something about unpromising beginnings being misleading. Matthew, writing for Jewish readers

primarily, adds to Mark's version words about birds nesting in its branches. There are verses in Daniel and in Ezekiel which talk about all the nations coming to nest in the tree of the Kingdom of God. So here is an important factor – the kingdom is no longer a narrow sect – the in-crowd, the nation or anything else – it is the place for all people to be safe and at home. But it all starts with a tiny seed. The original readers of the Gospel must have felt they were a very tiny seed in the world of the Roman Empire. But what we have seen is that seed grew into the vast bush which is the Christian church today. And if at any point we feel small and insignificant as Christians, it is an image to return to.

The second 'growth' parable is the yeast. Again, it doesn't take much to make a difference. The effect is way beyond what you might expect from such a tiny ingredient. There are so many recipes which ask for a pinch of this or that. It can seem so pointless to put in so little. But it makes all the difference. The kingdom of God is a transforming power in the world. That was true in the earliest generation in the way it changed the relationship of Jews and Gentiles who became believers. In later generations it began to change the relationships of husbands and wives. It began the emancipation of women. It led to freedom for slaves. It led to the establishment of hospitals, of schools for everyone, of hospices to care for the dying. Those things might have come from other sources – but our country at least, they came from Christians working out in practice what it was to be part of the kingdom of God on earth.

Then Matthew gives us two parables of Jesus which are about discovery and joy. – the treasure in the field and the pearl. They are both about finding something of enormous value, and so making that the focus of what we want, that we re-value everything else. When people don't seem to value their faith very highly – and God is a kind of optional extra to life, it would seem to indicate that they haven't done that re-valuing. They will come to church if they aren't too busy. They will pray if they get round to it. But it is not the driving force. But on the other hand, those who have really seen what the kingdom is about find that suddenly or gradually, they *do* re-prioritise things. The difference between the stories is that in the treasure in the field, it is stumbled upon by accident, whereas in the pearl story it is actively being sought – by a pearl trader. We probably all know people who represent those two ways into the kingdom. There are people who stumble across God.. Something happens to them, they read something, they hear something, and it all begins to make sense. But they haven't been consciously looking for it. The man in the story recognises what he finds to be immensely valuable –and that is what happens to them.

But of course there are 'seekers' – people who are looking for 'the meaning of life' or whatever. They are listening out for things that will make sense of the world they live in. And they are finding that Jesus' words about 'Seek and you will find' come true. And so their world, their attitudes, their

values change. It can be dramatic – Paul talked about re-valuing things so that all his previously held dearest convictions were like garbage compared with the worth of knowing the love of God in Jesus. That doesn't mean that what he believed before was rubbish - he was talking about the faith of his ancestors, which God had honoured and continues to honour. It isn't a story about preferring a real pearl to an imitation one. The other pearls the man has collected are beautiful and valuable. But this one outshines them all, and makes them seem like rubbish *in comparison*. There is another common factor in the two stories about the *joy* of those who make the discovery of the kingdom. Finding faith is a joyous thing for them – and of course Jesus talked about their also being joy in heaven.

Jesus ends with a question to them – Do you understand this? The disciples didn't always get things right – they are like the rest of us. But getting these truths about the kingdom right is important, he says. That doesn't change, if we are to go on praying 'your kingdom come'. We need the confidence that the kingdom *will* come, even if slowly, as we see it. That it is slow doesn't mean it isn't strong. So we need confidence in the gospel of God's love which will conquer everything. And we need to be open to discovering the priceless love of God. Sometimes we will have what someone has called 'little epiphanies' – little glimpses and insights which open our eyes to see things in a new way. But we are not just to wait for those to happen – like the pearl dealer, we can go out and search for the truth, and God will honour that search

Then Jesus ends with these words 'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is old and what is new.' What is that about? Well – those people he was talking to, for all that they didn't understand first time always, were steeped in the knowledge of how God had dealt with their people through the centuries. They knew the Old Testament, as we would call it, and its unfolding story of God's truth. That was what was old, and it was not to be discarded. But what was new – what Jesus was teaching them - would illuminate it so that they would see it and value it in a new way. So when people find faith, they are not to discard the past in some wholesale way. There may be things about the past which *need* to be discarded, but there are other things which simply need to be re-valued in the light of what we know about God's love in Jesus. All that we are is offered to him, to be made part of what can bring about the kingdom within us, and help us to be part of the growth of the kingdom in others.

An Indian New Testament scholar, George Soares-Prabhu put it well: 'The kingdom comes as a gift, but it comes also as a responsibility inviting urgent and active response from those to whom it is given. Salvation comes from God, but it is actualised in and through the struggles of the poor.'

The kingdom comes to us, and for us, and it also comes by us and through us. As we pray at the end of the service 'Send us out into the world to live and work to your praise and glory,' to see and recognise and celebrate where the kingdom is, and where it isn't, but might be if only we play our part. May you find the Kingdom growing in and through you, and may you treasure it above all else.