

The Kingdom (1) – Is our priority (Matthew 16:13-20, Daniel 7:13-14)

QUESTION: Which of these words used most by Jesus? (S) Love, save(d), blessed, kingdom, Lord, heaven (PAIRS / FEEDBACK) – Heaven (86), Lord (97), KINGDOM (104) **(S)**. Other 3 interpreted what Jesus did, but what he talked about most of all was Kingdom.

Begin series today on Kingdom of God – specifically Jesus' teaching on it. Fundamental theme, often overlooked. Over next 5-6 weeks, attempt to set record straight.

Really story of whole bible. (Expand one day....) God's plan to create a kingdom of his people. Begun in Eden – then broken – promised to Abraham, foreshadowed by Joshua, glimpsed briefly under some of the kings, prophesied by prophets and inaugurated by Jesus – and ultimately, finally complete at end of time when world will be judged and God's people will finally live as God intended, together with him forever under his perfect blessing. Story of bible is story of kingdom.

It lies at heart of our understanding of Jesus. Jesus himself understood this, as passage from Daniel makes clear. Describes a vision of heaven – at the centre is a divine figure described as a Son of Man who was given all authority by God and, crucially a kingdom – REFS v14 (sovereign power = 'kingdom'; last phrase 'kingdom').

Fast forward to Jesus – who is he and what is his message? Jesus makes it clear – he is this 'Son of Man' (usual phrase he calls himself), and central message is kingdom. First words of his public ministry as recorded by Matthew and Mark: **(S)** 'Time has come and....kingdom of God is near.' In other words, this crazy prophecy of Daniel is being fulfilled. The Son of Man is here, he's come and he's bringing the kingdom.

Kingdom remains major theme of his teaching – part of which we'll focus on for these few weeks. But what is it? Wherever the king's rule is seen. So kingdom of *God* is: **(S)**

Wherever God's rule or blessing is seen

Basic observations:

(S) Spiritual kingdom, not a physical one. It's wherever God rules – crosses all boundaries. i.e. Not like the kingdom of world – in fact much of the teaching of the NT is that the kingdom of world largely opposes the values, perhaps even the very existence of, the kingdom of God. Those who serve king Jesus worship another king ahead of the physical kingdom in which they live – and that threatens both the physical powers of this world as well as the spiritual powers. Not so stark in West, in our age of democracies and parliaments, but profound threat to many secular powers. And perhaps increasingly so in our day as well.

Can't ignore the implication that there's conflict built into this idea of the kingdom, and what lies behind so much of the persecution of Christians around the world. Not main theme for today, but plan to return in the future to think about this idea of conflict between 2 kingdoms, there's so much more we could say about that.

(S) 'Kingdom' and 'church' are not the same thing. Related, but different. Church is most obvious sign of kingdom, meant to show rule and blessing of God in the world – but kingdom is bigger than church. **(expand)** Whenever someone receives unexpected mercy and forgiveness from another, God's kingdom comes. When the poor are fed by the generosity of others, the kingdom comes. When communities are healed and lives restored, the kingdom comes. God doesn't always get the glory, but it's still *His* vision of life in operation. And the church ought to be at the forefront of doing all that stuff. That's what we pray for when we say 'your kingdom come'. May all this kind of kingdom stuff be the reality in our world!

And sadly, also true that sometimes the church has very little to do with the kingdom **(S)**. Sad reality is that the church often forgets that Jesus' priority for his followers is to declare and to demonstrate the kingdom of God. We get fixated on churchy stuff and forget that Jesus teaches his disciples to invest their energies on the kingdom instead. Not that the church isn't important – but irony is that the church is really only the church when it doesn't think too much about itself. It fixes on Jesus, and on his kingdom, and on blessing others and bringing the kingdom into new areas of life.

Here's how Howard Snyder, an American theologian put it in the first words of his influential book 'Liberating the Church' **(S)** – READ QUOTE

Challenging stuff – asked Ann to put whole first chapter on website: only 8 pages, but if too much, 10 theses on last 2 pages are key: want to return to these in 2016 for us all to reflect on.

If all sounds too theoretical, Snyder's broader point is that way we do church reflects fundamental patterns of thinking which are largely unexpressed but quietly dictate the way we do things – and more importantly, they don't fit with Jesus' teaching. **What I want us to do as a church over these next few weeks** is to use these simple bits of Jesus' teaching on the kingdom to reflect honestly for ourselves but also as a church as to how we're doing in terms of our focus on the kingdom.

Are we too churchy, too preoccupied with minor matters? What kingdom stuff is God calling us to? What would that look like? What would it mean for our church? It may be that we conclude that the kingdom is our focus and we just need to keep on doing that – but if not, I hope we can be open to hear Jesus' call to us, as he calls every generation of his followers, to become a kingdom community reflecting his priorities. And then to pray and to act accordingly.

So, briefly, to our main gospel passage. Well-known passage – but usually focus on first half – who is Jesus? Peter works it out and this is a pivotal moment in the gospel story. But often neglect 2nd half, and there's some profoundly important gems for us, especially for the main focus of our thinking today. All about church and kingdom – passage tells us about two priorities, two responsibilities – two simple points:

(S) Jesus builds his church – READ v18. So simple, but usually miss it: who builds the church? Jesus. He might appoint Peter, but Jesus builds his church. And he still does, through the Holy Spirit. The church at its heart is not an organisation or an institution but a community built by Jesus, operating now through the Holy Spirit.

Profound challenge to me, but maybe to all of us. Often been guilty of using language that suggests that building and growing the church was somehow down to me, or maybe to all of us. We think a lot about *our* plans, *our* initiatives, *our* ministries. But maybe we've got this basic point wrong: question is not, 'how are we going to build the church here?' but 'how is Jesus going to build his church here?' What are his plans? Where is He directing us?

My sense is that this passage contains the seeds of what should be our major preoccupation for 2016, and perhaps well beyond that. Two questions for us, first is this **(S)**:

Where is Jesus directing us, so that He can build His church here?

(S) ...our concern is with His kingdom. READ v18b-19. So, Jesus says to Peter, I (Jesus) will build the church, but your job is the kingdom, that's your concern, and I'll give you the keys i.e. the permission, the authority to go and do it.

Isn't this the opposite way round to what we thought? Most of us go through our whole Christian lives thinking that *Jesus* builds his kingdom and *our* job is to build the church. But no, He builds the church and he gives us the keys to the kingdom. True that still involves him: hence we pray your kingdom come every time we pray the Lord's Prayer (as referred to briefly earlier). But again, notice we never pray for the church, Jesus tells us to pray for the kingdom: it's *his* kingdom (kingdom, power and glory...) and we pray for the kingdom to come. 'Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven' is a pretty good definition of what it means for God's kingdom to come.

So here's 2nd question for us for this year **(S)**:

How can we as a church declare and demonstrate God's kingdom in this community?

That's why we exist, that's our purpose. Let Jesus build the church, our job is to get on with bringing the kingdom.

As finish, a personal confession. Been profoundly challenged by this passage again as prepared for today. I spend far too much time thinking about the church and all its minutiae – its meetings, its organisation, its structures. Should be spending a lot more of my time thinking about the kingdom. Jesus has given us the keys, have we opened the door?

Maybe that's a message for all of us too. Let's all think *less* about the church this year and much, much more about the kingdom. So we can pray later with genuine intent: 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.' Amen.