

The Meaning of Jesus' Kingdom Parables

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[Reading: Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52]

Last time I was with you I suggested that we cannot understand Jesus' mission – and therefore Christian mission – unless we first ask what Jesus *thought* he was doing when he healed the sick, raised the dead, and cast out demons.

This is because his actions, viewed on their own, are potentially misleading (Jn 6). Viewed outside the context of the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption, Jesus is little more than a faith healer, exorcist, or moral teacher.

Disconnected from the biblical “plot” Jesus' deeds shed little or no light on his self-understanding – or on the nature of his mission and calling.

Detached from his Jewish roots and beliefs, moreover, he merely conforms to our own image and likeness: a Christ who reflects twenty first century western, liberal values.

Yet in our efforts to contemporise him we forget how radically different and uncompromising he was compared to us. Jesus believed that the Law of Moses was still binding (Matt 5:17-20), that the impenitent risked perdition (Lk 13:1-5), and that he alone was the way to God (Jn 14:6).

Clearly if Jesus was “tolerant” it wasn't in the sense that Paddy Ashdown or Desmond Tutu arguably are. The Jesus of the New Testament knew nothing of the Enlightenment or Interfaith dialogue. Being old fashioned he believed in quaint things like absolute truth.

Given this, it is surprising that so many Christians should read back into Jesus' teachings moral and theological viewpoints which he simply would not have held as a first century Jew.

To argue, for instance, that Jesus was gloriously indifferent to people's sexual behaviour or preferences is as implausible as the notion that he preached the universal brotherhood of man or the need to be true to oneself.

The Jesus of the gospels was a first century Jew who upheld the moral integrity of the Torah (Lk 16:16-18). The Church, therefore, will pay a heavy price for pressing his teaching into the service of secular ethical agendas (2 Tim 4:3-4). The Master has gone into a far country, we are told in a parable, but will return and demand that his servants give account of their stewardship (Lk 19:11-27).

If we want to be faithful to the gospel we need to know how God's purposes for humankind are enacted in Jesus' life and death. God's story about Jesus is *according to the scriptures* (Lk 24:47; Rom 1:1-6; Gal 3:8; 1 Pet 1:10-12). By heeding this story, by living in continuity with it, we can avoid reading deviant or anachronistic ideas into the Saviour's teaching and ministry.

Jesus appointed twelve apostles, I suggested on my last visit, because he believed that Israel's spiritual captivity was over (Isa 40-66). First century Jews anticipated a time of ingathering when God would summon his scattered tribes from the four corners of the earth (Ezek 34:4-16; 37; Hos

2; Mic 5:1-9; Matt 19:28). On its heels an era of Messianic bliss was expected, culminating in the redemption of Israel and the transformation of the cosmos (Isa 60).

Jesus believed he was inaugurating this new age – enacting God's promises to turn the tide of history in favour of his people (Isa 40-66). This was known to Jews as the *Kingdom of God* – the subject of almost all of Jesus' parables (Matt 13; Mk 4), and the topic of our sermon this morning.

What is intriguing about Jesus' kingdom parables is that they do not explain what the kingdom of God or heaven is, only what it's like! Think for a moment about the parables in our reading:

God's kingdom is like a mustard seed (v31-32); or yeast mixed with flour (v33); or hidden treasure (v44); or a merchant's pursuit of pearls (v45-46); or a net flung into the sea (v47-50).

Nowhere does Jesus define what the kingdom is. Why not?

Well simply because in Jesus' day people knew what was meant by the expression, "the kingdom of God". The gospel writers had no need to explain it. No more than we need to explain the term "Holocaust" to Jews.

For centuries successive empires had held sway over God's chosen people.

The Prophet Daniel foresaw a day when the gentile superpowers would collapse and the God of Israel would rule the world (Dan 7-12). According to the Magnificat, and the Song of Zechariah in Luke Chapter 1, Jews at the time of Christ were living in expectation of the kingdom (vv46-55; 68-79).

The kingdom of God, then, refers to that time when human pride and ingenuity will capitulate to God's way of running the world. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus outlines a manifesto of the kingdom (Matt 5-7).

When God reigns the poor will be happy, the grief stricken will be comforted, and the hungry and thirsty will be satisfied. Those considered insignificant by worldly standards will be viewed as great in God's eyes. Those despised and persecuted for owning Christ's name will receive imperishable rewards. People will treat each other differently when the kingdom comes. People will be merciful, peacemakers, pure in heart. They will be as salt and light in a dark and decaying world where people are bereft of meaning, purpose, and a sense of God.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Jesus' parables is their claim that the powers of the kingdom are already here—invisibly, mysteriously, at work in the world (Lk 17:21).

But no less intriguing is the fact that Jesus' parables are deliberately intended to mystify those whose hearts are closed to God (Matt 13:10-16).

When Jesus says in Matt 13:34 *I will open my mouth to speak in parables*, he is quoting from Ps 78 which is all about Israel's disobedience. The parables, then, were originally directed at a people who had turned its back on God.

By implication Jesus was addressing a people who had become remote from God in their religion.

At heart the parables are an invitation to come back to God and participate in the feast of eternal life (Lk 14:16-24). But will we, the hearers, accept God's call? Or will his summons fall on deaf ears? We can't be neutral. Our response will indicate whether we are for or against God; for or against his coming kingdom.

To tease this out a little I want to look for a moment at the parable Jesus told about hidden treasure:

The Kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field (Matt 13:44).

What is this about?

Serendipity: the bliss of sudden, unexpected, good fortune. But it is also about *hiddenness*: there is no sign saying: dig here for treasure. It is about *recognition*: only because the man knows the value of his find is he prepared to acquire possession of it. It is also therefore about *cost*: the treasure comes at the price of everything the man owns. And, like all parables, it's ultimately about *wisdom*: the man gains infinitely more than he invests.

We don't have time to explore all of these elements, but I'd like to say a few words about the theme of the hiddenness of the kingdom of God.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus began their public ministries by proclaiming the long awaited kingdom (Matt 3:2; 4:17). Yet in the parable we've just read the kingdom is something hidden, undisclosed. The man who metaphorically finds the kingdom in the parable appears to have stumbled upon it by accident rather than sought for it deliberately.

A key element of the parable, then, is that God's reality and purposes for humankind are not readily discernible. They are even hidden from the people to whom they were originally revealed (Rom 9-11).

Another way of putting it would be to say that the irruption of God's kingdom in the world is not a presupposition of contemporary socio-cultural or political thought.

The Financial Times has nothing to say about the impact of God's coming kingdom on stocks and shares. The ecological consequences of world redemption are overlooked in the Independent. The Daily Telegraph science supplement is ignorant of Christ's cosmic reign. BBC news bulletins belie the notion that God's kingdom is a factor in global events. Intellectuals and thinkers also ply their trade without reference to God's presence or activity in the world.

But why is the kingdom so hidden when Jesus made it so open and public?

Jesus provides an uncomfortable answer to this question earlier in the chapter:

You will indeed listen, but never understand, and you will indeed look, but never perceive. For this people's heart has grown dull and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them (Matt 13:14-15)

According to Jesus sin has deafened and blinded us to the reality of God in the world.

We need cleansed hearts, cleansed vision, and cleansed minds to see the kingdom of God. Otherwise it remains frustratingly imperceptible.

Think for a moment of what happened in the case of Jesus.

When he got done to death his execution was equated with divine disfavour rather than the coming of God's kingdom. How else can we explain this other than to say that Jesus' co-religionists got their theology spectacularly wrong!

But they are not alone. There are many would be Christians who wear doubt and unbelief as a badge of respectability.

So if we can't see or hear God or perceive his coming kingdom then what is to be done?

We must begin by accepting God's diagnosis of our problem.

Would we feel irked or annoyed if a doctor were to tell us that life saving surgery was our only hope of survival? Or what kind of patient would ask their consultant to find a less offensive word than "terminally ill" when having their biopsy report explained to them? The answer is a patient who doesn't want to know the truth about their condition.

I know a woman who is searching high and low to find and know God. She comes from a Christian background but has felt for years that God is remote or doesn't exist. She asked me why it was so difficult to reach him given that she prays so fervently and reads her bible. I was stumped by her question for months. One day I asked her if she believed that that sin could separate people from God. "No", she replied, emphatically. That, I sense, was the root of her problem. She wanted God and salvation on her terms. And it never works.

Sin does separate us from God. Jesus says it makes us deaf and blind to God's reality in the world, and in our lives. If we don't accept Jesus' diagnosis then we will always have impaired spiritual sight and hearing.

The single greatest tragedy of the twentieth century, I believe, was not the slaughter of countless hundreds of millions in two world wars, but the redundancy of sin in the vocabulary of western civilisation.

We are still groping in the dark as we launch into the third millennium.

The kingdom of God, the triumph of the Messiah, the presence of the Holy Spirit, the redemption of the world, the transformation of the cosmos, the defeat of evil, the power of the resurrection and of the age to come, are potent realities in our world. They are visible to the eyes of faith, but hidden to those who have been blinded by sin.

Saint Paul gives a curious instruction to the Christian believers at Corinth. He says "Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith" (2 Cor 13:5). It's an odd, but sound piece of advice.

Here goes then: am I discerning God's presence and activity in the world? Is Christ's resurrection daily transforming me? Is the kingdom really come in my life or is it just religious jargon?

If the things of God are distant and remote from our lives then there is good news. Jesus says that if we turn to him in repentance and faith he will touch our eyes and ears so that we will be able to see God at work in our lives and in the world, and hear him speak to us in all the noise and confusion of the twenty first century.