

What Faith Looks Like **The Kingdom of God**

Isa 9:1-4

Matt 4:12-23

We've been asking the question "What does faith look like?" This morning we are focussing on the kingdom of God.

It is said that the Old Testament is the New Testament concealed and the New Testament is the Old Testament revealed. Promises that are foretold in the Old Testament become reality in the New Testament. I like that. It somehow helps link the bible as a whole. You'll notice, as with our readings today, that Matthew often quotes the Old Testament in his gospel. In fact he makes 53 actual quotes and 76 other references. Matthew's gospel was originally written for the Jews. Matthew wanted to offer as much evidence as he could to his people, that Jesus was the Messiah, the Saviour, the long awaited Son of God. It is so sad that so many didn't accept his evidence then and so many don't now!

Jesus has set up home the Capernaum, the very place Isaiah prophesied centuries before. He is beginning His public ministry, proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven, like a town crier announcing an important event to the people. That's how it was in the past before we had newspapers, let alone TV, phones and social media. In Matthew's gospel Jesus proclaims "Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near". It's the first thing he tells people. It is his most important message. I like the use of the word "proclaims". It's much stronger than "tells us about". Jesus is saying the Kingdom of Heaven is, arriving, on its way for definite.

Mark begins his gospel in a similar way. Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

So what is this all about? This kingdom stuff. Why the different terms kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God?

Firstly the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Heaven mean exactly the same. Matthew was very sensitive to his Jewish friends who never referred to God by name. They considered that disrespectful. Matthew not wanting to give them any reason to take offence uses the word "heaven" rather than naming God.

This has caused a lot of confusion because it leads us to think that the Kingdom of God is a location, heaven, another place where we are taken to when we die. I don't want to add to our confusion today so I looked up what Bishop Tom Wright says, he is our country's leading expert on the Kingdom. He says "that the kingdom of God is a place makes no sense here. How could this sort of kingdom be said to be arriving or coming near?"

The kingdom of God is best understood as the kingship or sovereign and saving rule of God in other words "no king but God". The first century Jews were so excited when they heard Jesus say that God's kingdom was coming. To them it meant revolution was on the way. Images of banners come to mind "Our God in" "Caesar out" "Come on reign of God"! The Jews were longing for the Roman oppression, they were under, to end.

As we know (and will think about in more detail particularly as we approach Easter) the victory and the revolution God had planned was very different from what they expected. (Actually I find this applies frequently in my relationship with God I think I've got it sussed and know where I'm heading only to find I hit a road block and I find God has different ideas.)

Tom Wright summarises the dilemma by saying "God creates an amazing, beautiful creation but the people, he gave to live in it, don't follow his ways. So we experience brokenness, suffering and chaos. God longs to set everything right and he will restore everything to order and lasting fruitfulness."

God's kingdom, his rule and reign, will mean healing and rescue for everything and everybody who say yes to Him. In other words everyone who responds to Jesus' invitation to want to live life His way. (You will notice that I deliberately say "want to live his way". He is so aware that we can't totally do this yet. We can't do any of it on our own. Only Through His grace and mercy and strength given to us daily by the Holy Spirit can we grow in love and faith, living more as Jesus' children.)

Hearing this you could think the Kingdom is an "inside thing" giving our hearts to Jesus. As spiritual journeys are my passion it would be easy for me to focus solely on this aspect of the Kingdom. Our inner spiritual journey is certainly part of experiencing the Kingdom of God. But there is so much more. It is inside and outside, everywhere. "The whole of creation is groaning to be set free from bondage and decay", as it says in Romans 8.

As well as being inside/out the kingdom of God is also upside/down. Here we are entering into the realm of things that are hard to grasp and we will need to explore this further another time. But suffice to say here, that although God is always loving and good, He seems to allow things that don't make sense to us. Even at times seem unfair. Why all the suffering? I don't know. He doesn't promise life won't be painful and difficult but he does promise never to leave us. He can bring good out of, what seem to us, the worst circumstances. We need a lot of help to see things from God's perspective.

Jesus says this inside/out upside/down Kingdom is on its way. God will bring in His Kingdom. But here's the exciting part. God wants our help. I find this mind blowing and scary. The all powerful creator of the universe wants our help, yours and mine!

It seems that God has set things up so the Kingdom will not come automatically. Part of our role is praying for the increase of God's rule and reign. We pray for the Kingdom to come every time we pray the Lord's Prayer. "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". But how is this going to happen? As well as pray what else can we do? How can we help God? Jesus doesn't want to take us away from the Earth He wants us to be "transformers". Now this word has a very different meaning to our grandson Adam. He has toy robots that you fold up to make a car! Jesus wants to make us "agents of transformation" of our world. He wants us to partner with Him in bringing in the Kingdom.

We've talked a lot over the last few weeks about becoming the people God created us to be and here is one reason why I think this is so important. The bible tells us we are made in God's image (Gen 1:26) and He made us "very good". I believe that we each have a unique aspect of God in the centre of us. Living from this centre is being the "me" God

created us to be. Somehow this essence of God within us designs us for a unique role that God is calling us to. When we discover this role and start living from it we will best be able to partnership with God to bring in the kingdom. Ok maybe we can make sense of this when we look at Jon and Terry, called to be clergymen, but what about us? No one is excluded.

It won't surprise you to know that I think it's all about love. Every action we take where we extend ourselves for the sake of another person, when we don't act selfishly but offer self giving love, do what Jesus would do, showing forgiveness and compassion, allow the holy spirit to flow through us, when we do these things the kingdom comes a little more. CSLewis calls this "good infection". "Coughs and sneezes spread diseases" where love and kindness spread the kingdom.

So what does faith look like? Today faith looks like partnering with God. Joining in His incredible Kingdom work to restore and reconcile everything. Even us!