

ST STEPHEN'S HOME SERVICE – SUNDAY 26th JULY 2020

INTRODUCTION

What does the *Kingdom of Heaven* mean to you?

It was at the very heart of Jesus' message. He clearly thought his presence meant it was breaking in. In fact, he believed it had arrived because he was here. We pray for its coming whenever we say the Lord's Prayer. But what was it? What is it?

One answer is that it simply means God's rule. Wherever His good and perfect will is done – His kingdom has arrived then and there? But what does that look like? How to describe it?

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers a variety of pictures, each shedding light on a different facet of that question. And you and I are invited to reflect: which of those resonates with my own experience now?

So pause for a few moments to ask yourself: "*Where has God been at work in my life this week?*" "*Where is He at work in the world around me?*" "*Where is He at work amidst all the confusion, pain and disruption caused by the Covid crisis?*"

A small clue. You can be sure the answer is not: "*He isn't.*"

Because in Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven is already among us. And because, as we will hear St Paul remind us, nothing – absolutely nothing – can ever separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

CALL TO WORSHIP

O God, you summon the day to dawn,
You teach the morning to waken the earth.

Great is your name.

Great is your love.

For you the valleys shall sing for joy,
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Great is your name.

Great is your love.

For you the monarchs of the earth shall bow,
And the poor and persecuted shall shout for joy.

Great is your name.

Great is your love.

Your love and mercy shall last for ever,
Fresh as the morning, new as the sunrise.

Great is your name.

Great is your love.

TURNING AGAIN TO GOD

St Paul assures us, "If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Who will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us." (Romans 8:31,34). So with confidence we can come to God and pray:

Holy God, Maker of us all

Have mercy on us.

Jesus Christ, Son of Mary,

Have mercy on us.

Holy Spirit, breath of life,

Have mercy on us.

Let us in silence be honest with God and with ourselves about where we have fallen short.

Silence

In the community of Christ's Church

And in the presence of all God's people,

We confess to God that we have sinned

In thought, word and deed.

We have not loved God, cared for God's world,

Or respected God's people as we should.

We own our responsibility and pray for God's pardon.

May God forgive us,

Christ befriend us,

And the Spirit renew us,

And change our lives.

NEW TESTAMENT READING (Romans 8:26-39 *New Living Translation*)

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honour at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL READING (Matthew 13:31-33,44-52 NRSV)

Jesus put before them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.'

He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.'

'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.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

'Have you understood all this?' They answered, 'Yes.' And he said to them, '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 new and what is old.'

Thanks be to God.

REFLECTION (by Lindsey Coulthard)

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, it's like yeast, it's like treasure, it's like a merchant, it's like a net..... "Have you understood all this?" Jesus asks the disciples and back comes the reply "yes" we understand. On this occasion indeed

they do. But Jesus is telling these parables for the benefit of the crowd, the likes of you and me, not the disciples. He often uses parables as a way of telling down to earth stories about everyday things in order to reveal himself. Perhaps sensing the crowds need help to understand this, Jesus helpfully offers a number of different illustrations. And isn't that just what we need sometimes? Because often just when we begin to think we've got a hold of something; we realise we haven't after all.

I was never any good at maths when I was at school. I'm not sure how or where my dislike for the subject came from but I never really got it. In particular – I never really got long division. But I thank God for the patience of my maths teacher because how he ever put up with me, I'll never know. Recognising this was an issue for me he offered me extra help and so every day for a week, I trotted along to his office at lunchtime to go through some practice questions. Did I ever really get it? In part, I suppose. Could I talk you through my workings? I'm not so sure! In a roundabout way I guess that's reflected somewhat in our gospel reading this morning. By using all these earthy analogies He's hoping that the crowds will be able to make connections, to be able to understand just what he means. And when we speak of the kingdom of heaven today, what we're really talking about is God being at work in the world.

And who could possibly deny that for the last few months in particular, it has been incredibly difficult to work out just what

God has been doing in the world. Our worlds have been shaken which has left many of us feeling unsettled or uncertain for the future. Our experience of God in the world around us and our experience of church life has certainly changed. So thinking of those pictures given to us in the parables this morning, I wonder which of them speaks most into our lives at the moment?

Does the kingdom feel like mustard seed or yeast? For the gardeners amongst us here, perhaps it's the image of the tiny mustard that resonates with you. This tiny, tiny seed that is capable of reaching up to twenty feet in height. For the bakers amongst us here, cast your mind back to the first time you ever made bread. The smallest amount of yeast when added to the flour and water completely transformed your original lump of dough into this soft fluffy pillow twice its original size. Has your world changed this dramatically, just as yeast in the flour and water or as the seed when planted in the soil? Our experience of God in the world around us and our experience of church life has certainly changed.

Perhaps the kingdom feels more like hidden treasure or the merchant in search of a fine pearl. In other words demanding we take some action or have been required to make decisions between one thing or another, one person or another. We've all had to decide who will be part of our own 'social bubbles'. And all of us no doubt, will have had to learn some new skills. Let's take Zoom as just one example. How many of us would

describe it as hidden treasure? For some of us though, that's exactly what it's been because it's enabled us to feel connected. And for others it has brought even greater joy in the form of seeing family on the other side of the world.

Maybe the kingdom feels like a net. Are you in the safety of the net with others or do you see yourself outside the net, perhaps floundering or vulnerable? Perhaps you're experiencing a combination of all of these? And it's often when we feel unsettled or uncertain that we need to hang on to the familiar. There's a certain safety within it. We may need to hold the comfortable close, but I think Jesus is offering something rather special and, in a way comforting, when he says to the crowds, "everyone who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven (*that's all of us*) is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old". Some might suggest that this was a reference to the 'old' revelation in the law of the Torah and the 'new' revelation in Jesus himself; but Jesus never says the old is useless because we now have new. Jesus says he has come "not to abolish the law, but to fulfil it". Each will be a gift to the other. So the challenge for us today, as we slowly emerge from lockdown is to discover and discern where God is at work in this community and how best we can use the comfort of our old treasure whilst having the courage to embrace our new treasure.

As kingdom people there is much talk and speculation over what the 'new normal' will look like for us. And the prospect of change, can feel alarming and unsettling, especially when it might feel that we have lost so much. But hear these words of reassurance offered by Isaiah, "comfort, comfort my people" because we who are currently dispersed, collectively have so much treasure to share. And as brothers and sisters in Christ, we can encourage each other to bring out our old treasure and delight in our new treasure. As we pause to reflect for a moment now, let's think again of the parables we've heard this morning, and of the confusion we too may be grappling with. Safe in the knowledge that whether gathered or dispersed, we have an entire household of riches and treasures to share.

Take a few moments to reflect quietly on what God may be saying to you.

WHO IS THE GOD IN WHOM WE TRUST?

Holy, holy, holy

Is the Lord God almighty,

Who was, and is, and is to come.

We believe in God the Father,
who created all things:

**for by His will they were created
and have their being.**

We believe in God the Son,
Who was slain:

**For with his blood
He purchased us for God,
From every tribe and language,
From every people and nation.**

We believe in God the Holy Spirit:

**The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'
Even so, come, Lord Jesus!**

Amen

A CELEBRATION OF GOD'S KINGLY RULE

The kingdom of God is justice and joy;
for Jesus restores
what sin would destroy.
God's power and glory
in Jesus we know
and here and hereafter
the kingdom shall grow.

The kingdom of God
is mercy and grace;
the captives are freed,
the sinners find place,
the outcast are welcomed
God's banquet to share;
and hope is awakened
in place of despair.

The kingdom of God
is challenge and choice:
believe the good news,
repent and rejoice!
His love for us sinners
brought Christ to his cross:
our crisis of judgement
for gain or for loss.

God's kingdom is come,
the gift and the goal;
in Jesus begun,
in heaven made whole.
The heirs of the kingdom
shall answer his call
and all things cry 'Glory!'
to God all in all.

PRAYERS

May the Spirit pray through us
As we try to put into words the longings of our hearts
For the church and for the world.

Father we thank you
for the reassurance that nothing in Heaven or on Earth
can ever separate us from your love for us.

Give us the confidence to face with hope whatever is ahead
in our lives and the life of our Church.

And give us grace to know which treasures from our past
need to be preserved,
and to discover new treasures to share with the world
in these uncertain and confusing times.

Silence

Lord of all creation,

Teach us your ways.

Father, we thank you for the beauty and diversity
Of the created world we inhabit.

We ask for the wisdom to tend it carefully,
Respecting the natural laws and sharing the resources,
Listening to the weak as well as the strident,
The poor as well as the affluent and powerful.

Silence

Lord of all creation,

Teach us your ways.

Father, we thank you
For the advances in medical knowledge
And the hope of new treatments.
We pray for all in medical research
And all whose lives are affected by illness, frailty or damage.
Give comfort and reassurance,
Healing, wholeness and peace.

Silence

Lord of all creation,
Teach us your ways.

Father, we call to mind
All those we have known and loved
Who lived among us and now have died.
Among those we remember today are Sheila King; and our
loved ones whose anniversaries we remember at this time: Joy
Cox, David Cooper, June Fisher, Megan Rowe, Jim Adams,
Marjorie Tabberer, Ron Smith, and George Lawrence.
We ask that they and all who have died may all know your
mercy
And the everlasting peace and joy of heaven.

Silence

Lord of all creation,

Teach us your ways.

*Take a few moments to remember before God other people and
situations on your heart now.*

Lord our God,

In all the events and phases of our life
We give you thanks
For your steadfast and unchanging love
Which sustains and directs us,
And that Your Kingdom is among us.

Merciful Father

Accept these prayers
For the sake of your Son,
Our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

We pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

**Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily
bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who
sin against us.
Lead us not into
temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the
power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen.**

**Our Father, who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come;
thy will be done;
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread.
And forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us.
And lead us not into
temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
the power and the glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen.**

NOTHING CAN SEPARATE US FROM GOD'S LOVE IN

CHRIST

Do not be afraid, for I have redeemed you.

I have called you by your name; you are mine.

When you walk through the waters I'll be with you,

You will never have to sink beneath the waves.

Do not be afraid...

When the fear of loneliness is looming,

Then remember I am at your side.

Do not be afraid...

You are mine, O my child; I am your father,

And I love you with a perfect love.

Do not be afraid...

ENDING

From where we are now

To where You want us to be

Jesus, lead us on.

From the security of what we know

To the adventure of what You will reveal

Jesus, lead us on.

To refashion the fabric of this world

Until it takes on the shape of your Kingdom

Jesus, lead us on.

Because we know that nothing can separate us from your
love

Jesus, lead us on.

**And may the blessing of God Almighty,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
be with us all evermore.
Amen.**

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