

## Introduction

As I have mentioned before I enjoy talk radio that covers news and sport. Last week One of the presenters had an interview with Sir Keir Starmer posing questions from the listeners. They all wanted to know what he would do if he was elected at the next election. What were his plans for the economy, the nhs, immigration, housing, climate change, Law and order and so on. He was quite general in his answers, not making clear promises or being definite about his intentions. That's fair enough because he isn't in power and cannot do anything about any of these issues and in the run up to the election the Labour Party will issue a manifesto – a declaration of its intentions should it get into power.

Jesus Christ started his ministry with a declaration of intent he proclaimed "The time has come, The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the Good News". His coming heralded the foundation of a new kingdom: The kingdom of God. Many people misunderstood the nature of that kingdom and throughout his ministry his followers were expecting Jesus to make some show of strength, overthrow the Roman occupying forces and reclaim the Kingdom of Israel for his people. Many people were confounded and confused when he was crucified on the cross because they had misunderstood the nature of his kingdom.

Today there is still confusion about the nature of the Kingdom of God. I know when I speak to people in study groups they often think it is a place. I remember someone saying to me after we had studied the kingdom of God . "I always thought it was a place like heaven where we would eventually end up. But I believe that it's something that happens here and now on earth and is about attitude and lifestyle" When we pray in the Lord's prayer "Your Kingdom come" we are not asking God to establish a new kingdom at a later date. It isn't about Jesus' second coming - though of course God's rule will never fully be established on earth until Jesus comes again in glory and all living creatures will bow before him and acknowledge him as Lord. What we mean by "Your kingdom come" is that we are asking God to establish his rule on earth, that his will be done. And of course the place where that will start is in our hearts and minds and lives. If God can conquer my heart with his love and gain my love and obedience he's made a good start.

During his ministry on earth Jesus taught a great deal about God's kingdom and what it is like. He refers to it over 120 times, sometimes teaching in parables and sometimes speaking more clearly about the attitudes and priorities we need to be a part of that kingdom. The parables in today's gospel reading are about the power and value of God's kingdom or rule.

Jesus often taught by telling pairs of stories which reinforced each other and added to the meaning of what he was saying. This is what he does in

**Matthew 13.31-33,44-52**

these parables, the first two showing how powerful God's rule is and the second two showing its value.

I don't know if you've ever done something which in itself was small but ended up having far reaching consequences. Maybe you introduced two friends who fell in love and ended up getting married. Perhaps you had a good idea which when put into practice ended up being enormous - for example William Wilberforce decided he needed to ask questions in the house of Commons about the slave trade and through the growth of his idea and campaigning he had far reaching influence on thousands of lives and changed the work structures of the western world. The person who designed the internal combustion engine has transformed the whole lifestyle and structure of the world. Something small can grow into something enormous.

In itself obeying God in our lives and letting him come first in everything we do seems a fairly small thing. It has a huge effect on us and our life - but the point Jesus is making is that when we commit ourselves to God it is not just ourselves that it affects and it can reach far and wide. The example he uses is that of a tiny mustard seed, which is not actually the smallest of all seeds, a cypress seed is smaller but in Israel it was proverbial for its smallness. This seed will grow into a bush about ten feet tall in which birds will nest. It is not actually a tree but Jesus seems to be quoting from the book of Daniel where Daniel has a dream where birds nest in a tree. His listeners would have recognised and understood the reference which was to the Kingdom of Nebuchadnezzar the birds stood for the nations which had come under his dominion. Here the birds are the non-Jews who will be brought into God's kingdom.

The message Jesus seems to be giving his followers here is that if we let God rule our lives, if we obey him and serve him where we are, our witness will have an effect on others and will be the small beginnings from which God's kingdom grows; which was in fact what happened. When Jesus died his followers numbered only a few hundred yet the Christian faith has spread throughout the world and although the established church is declining the number of Christians continues to grow.

The second parable makes a similar point but has a different emphasis. Jesus in telling of a woman making bread draws the contrast between the tiny quantity of yeast and the size of its effect. She puts a small amount into three measures of flour which is about 40 litres which will make bread for over 100 people. In Jewish thought and language leaven is almost always associated with an evil influence. Jesus himself on other occasions tells his followers "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees" . Fermentation was thought to be identical to putrefaction or decay.

**Matthew 13.31-33,44-52**

Jesus may have deliberately used this example because the shock of hearing the Kingdom of God compared to leaven would arouse the interest of his listeners and rivet their attention. His message is riveting because what he is drawing attention to is the transforming power of God's Kingdom. The small amount of leaven transforms the character of the woman's baking. There is a transformation in the dough and the end product, and instead of having a tough biscuit rather like water biscuits there is a light and tasty bread. God's kingdom has the power to transform our lives in the same way. Where we are obeying God and seeking his will in every situation we become totally and utterly transformed. We literally become different people because we are taking our reference from God instead of from ourselves and that makes us totally and utterly different - and much tastier!

Jesus goes on to tell two more stories that show that letting him rule our hearts and minds is not only a powerful and far reaching thing but it is actually the most valuable and important thing we can do. In both these stories two men each finds something of immense value and gives up everything he has to get it for himself. The first comes upon it accidentally in the course of his ordinary every day work. The second has spent his whole life looking for it and when he finds it sells everything he has because he knows he will never find anything else so valuable.

I don't know if you've ever done anything wild or extravagant in order to get something that is valuable to you. When the Racing Driver Nigel Mansell, who became world champion in the 1990's, first started in Motor Racing he sold his home in order to get the funds he needed. He wanted to race so much that he was prepared to put his family's security on the line. There was also a Welshman some years ago who sold the tiles from his roof in order to pay the cost of the train fare and ticket to see Wales play England in the Five Nations Competition at Twickenham. It was unfortunate that the weekend he did so it rained all weekend - and Wales lost. Yet it was so important to him to see his team play that he was prepared to risk the consequences however costly that might be.

This is the point Jesus is making. It is worth any sacrifice in order to enter the kingdom of God. So if that is a state of society on earth where God's will is done perfectly as it is in heaven then what he is actually saying is that it is worth anything in order to do God's will. Following Jesus may be very costly. But, Jesus says, the giving up is not sacrifice. The man sold all he had from self interest in order to buy something far greater and his reward was great joy. So for Jesus' disciples, for you and for me the 'giving up' is in the context of joy.

This is reinforced by the second of Jesus' stories. A merchant had spent his lifetime looking for a costly and beautiful pearl. He had others but he was looking for the most beautiful one of all. In those days in Israel, as

**Matthew 13.31-33,44-52**

indeed today people desired pearls not only for their monetary value but also for their beauty. There is pleasure in simply handling and contemplating a pearl, especially if it is a very fine one. So what Jesus is saying here is that the Kingdom of heaven is the loveliest of all possessions. Doing God's will is the most beautiful possession we can have and it is worth giving up a great deal for. The merchant had many other pearls but he was willing to give them up for the most perfect one. In the same way there are many fine and lovely things in life but the supreme pearl is the willing obedience that makes us friends of God.

*Perform bubble illusion*

In essence that is what God's kingdom is about - friendship with God, a closeness to him that is achieved because we love him and obey him. Jesus tells us that there is nothing in this world more valuable and that it is worth giving everything else up for. He also tells us that when we are prepared to give up the things we value to seek God's will in our lives it has far reaching consequences transforming ourselves, our attitudes, our relationships and our lifestyle. It also has a powerful effect on others and if we are truly seeking God and honouring him in the way we live it will be affecting the lives of the people we live and work amongst. The Good News will be proclaimed in our lives and others will come to know God for themselves.