



2 Thessalonians 3.6-14
Luke 21.5-19
17th November 2019

Your Kingdom Come

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Earlier this year, at the request of one or two in the congregation I wrote a little piece in Family News about liturgical colours. Purple is for Lent and Advent, Green for ordinary time, white for Easter, gold for Christmas and red – well, that's the least used. Sometimes worn on Palm Sunday and Pentecost and during these few weeks leading up to Advent which in the liturgical calendar is called Kingdom Season. A time when our readings in church speak to us about what the Kingdom of God might look like.

The Kingdom of God holds a prominent place in our theology and to talk of it is to use aspirational language and the poetry of prayer. It's both metaphor and reality encapsulating our hope and motivating our mission. The Kingdom of God has a future dimension alongside a here and now expression. It's to do with the transforming manifestation of God's love among us.

It's a phrase you'll never come across in the Jewish Scriptures, our Old Testament. But the idea is there.

Many of the psalms, sang in the temple, were called 'enthronement psalms' and they picture God as a king. King of his creation and King of the nation.

When the second temple was rebuilt after the Exile many worshippers gathered in its courts and remembered, maybe even mis-remembered, the golden age of King David and his son Solomon who built the first temple.

So, there was, in Jewish thought, the idea of a good King: wise and compassionate, and above all just.

In the time of Jesus many looked around at the political oppression of their day and railed against their subjugation under Rome and lamented the way their religious leaders seemed to have compromised with the Imperial authorities to keep their privileges.

They yearned for a different kind of rule and a fairer society and so they prayed: Your Kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Just a century and a half before Jesus a group had emerged called The Maccabees. These fierce and forceful activists stood against the foreign powers who ruled over Judah. They refused to collaborate with them and bow the knee to their false gods. It was a defining moment in the nation's history – a time when the continuation of their culture and identity was on the line.

Yet two paths of faithfulness were taken. On the one hand people like Judas Maccabeus rose up and used violence to stand against oppression. Yet, there was also the age of Daniel and his example when he chose a different pathway. He faithfully prayed to God despite a ban on any prayer other than that offered to king Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel willingly suffered for his faithfulness and submitted to the lion's den.

Two paths. Rather like those taken years later by those in the early 20th century Votes for Women campaign. The Suffragettes used violence whilst the Suffragists rejected it.

That debate about the use of violence to further a cause was around in Jesus' day as he sought to bring in The Kingdom of God. Judas Iscariot and other zealots were inspired by the Maccabees of just a century and a half before. They would have willingly used swords to bring in the Kingdom. But Jesus didn't choose that path, he was far more like Daniel and used words instead. Words and ideas that led him to a cross.

Jesus showed us a 'cross shaped Kingdom'. A peaceable kingdom, one based on loving service rather than violent retribution. He told his disciples to put away their swords, and take up instead, a bowl and towel in loving and sacrificial service.

Every organisation asks questions of itself from time to time. Questions about shared values and identity. It's, essentially, what a General Election is about: What sort of society do we want to become?

And it's an ongoing and vital question for The Church. What sort of continuing society is worthy of the description: Kingdom of God? What does the Kingdom of God – God's presence – look like in 2019? Can we find an expression of The Kingdom in our churches and how is it expressed in society?

Well, in this Kingdom Season leading up to Advent I think today's readings describes that Kingdom in two ways. From the epistle we learn that Kingdom life is worth the struggle, even as from the gospel we recognise that struggle is often tough.

In our epistle reading this morning St Paul brings us a word of encouragement. He writes: *Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.*

Paul, like all of us, has something of a mixed-up personality. At times we might struggle with his theology considering him to be too assertive, pedantic and even dogmatic. Yet there is also a deeply vulnerable and encouragingly pastoral Paul to be encountered in the New Testament and this verse from Thessalonians is just that: *Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.*

Living with Kingdom values, discerning God at work in our world, striving not just to pray for this kingdom but to play a part in its manifestation in my family, down my street, at my office and here at church – this demands the sort of faithfulness and commitment which we may feel is beyond us – so Paul whispers in our ears this morning: *Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right.* Don't give up!

Paul knew that some in the churches he had help to found held onto a belief that Jesus' Second Coming was just around the corner. The ascended Christ, they said, would certainly return to earth in their lifetimes. So, in the apostle's view, these apocalyptic believers had become idle and lazy in their Christian witness. For them it wasn't so much a case of living out their faith – just hanging on in there until the trumpets sounded from heaven signalling day one of the New Jerusalem. They had, in a way, already given up and retired from active faith.

So, gently, yet firmly, Paul raps them on the knuckles urging them to have a more active,

grounded and compassionate faith.

We sometimes hear of 'compassion fatigue' when one natural disaster comes close on the heels of another and the aid agencies detect the second appeal won't bring in as much money as the first. We are also aware that although the TV crews often fly out reporters to broadcast from the eye of, say, a cyclone, they often don't hang around much afterwards. Today's tragedy can all too quickly become tomorrow's old news.

In today's reading from the letter to the Thessalonians St Paul wants to pull us out of compassion fatigue. It's as if he's urging us to keep praying for those caught up in the Syrian civil war, to keep giving to the Chiltern Food Bank, to keep praying for the rift in our family to be healed. Paul says: Brothers and sisters, do not weary in doing what is right. Do not weary.

If we want a word to describe what the Kingdom of God is like, what being a disciple of Jesus Christ looks like – perhaps faithfulness is a good one.

We don't give up. We find daily motivation to be the loving, generous and open-hearted servants of God willingly serving in the Kingdom of God.

So, if today's epistle says serving in this Kingdom, although a struggle at times, is worth it, then today's gospel says, serving in this Kingdom will, at times be tough.

Luke 21 is not the most upbeat passage you'll ever hear read in church. Jesus predicts that his disciples will be persecuted and even has this one liner: *people will hate you because of me*. But, he says, stand firm.

Apostles like Andrew and Peter reputedly died on crosses, much like Jesus, whilst others like Paul might have been beheaded.

It's even sometimes said by church historians that 'the blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church'.

Of course, our experience of seeking to live faithfully as disciples of Jesus, in our context, has not been one of physical challenge. In Britain we have long cherished religious freedom and free speech. We have moved a long way from the days of the Amersham martyrs who were burned at the stake because they wanted to read the bible in English in their own homes.

But, in the market place of ideas we may struggle. We may feel ignored or caricatured by the media and the press. We may sense a growing militant atheism that fails to see any good whatsoever in the Church to which we belong. We may just sense that in our family, community or workplace acknowledging that we are Christian would be misunderstood or cause alienation.

But then, Jesus never promised it would be easy. He talked about taking the narrow rather than broad road, he told the parable of The Sower to teach us that in the work of the Kingdom harvest yields are often low.

Yet, more than any of that, he showed us in the life he lived that the cost of seeking justice and the price we might be called to pay for love is often personal sacrifice. For Jesus it led

him to the cross.

So, finally this morning, let's close by asking this question: why would anyone want to carry on praying: Your kingdom come?

Now I know not everyone in church this morning will be a monarchist, so apologies to the republicans amongst us for this closing illustration.

But I was struck during the Queen's 90th birthday year by some of the TV interviews given by her children and grandchildren. I thought it was significant that Prince William spoke so warmly about his grandmother's long service. It was clear that he, and other members of the family, not only respect her, they also love her.

And isn't it, amongst other things, that love for her, seeing what sort of servant queen she has been, isn't it that love and that example that inspires them to continue to serve Britain and the Commonwealth in a similar way. They have, somehow, caught the idea of what it means to serve in this kingdom from the sovereign herself.

Why might we, this morning, listen to Paul when he urges us to never give up doing good. Why might we read Luke 21 this morning and embrace the last verse of our reading urging us to stand firm.

Isn't it because Jesus has shown us what the Kingdom of God looks like. It's that love of God, expressed and revealed in the ministry of Jesus that inspires us to serve in this Kingdom of God. And if we desire to love God with all our hearts, our mind and our strength – then won't we also desire to serve God too.

It's as if we also have caught what it means to serve in the Kingdom of God from the King himself.

There is an old prayer that belongs to the Church's liturgy and it has a line in it which runs: It is our duty and our joy at all times and in all places to praise you, O Lord...

I love this marriage between duty and joy. Service in God's Kingdom is about a certain sense of duty. But it's never just about that. Our service would be impoverished if we simply performed it because we were on a rota to serve at church. Service is transformed when it's also a joy. When loving God and serving neighbour are joys, then something of the Kingdom of God is surely breaking through.

Paul writes: never grow weary of doing what is right. And Jesus says: even when it tough going – stand firm.

That's what service looks like in the Kingdom of God, not just a duty but also a joy.

May it be so, in your service and mine to the King of Kings, in the name of The Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.