

February 19, 2012

# "The Kingdom of God is like ..."

Mark 4:1-32

When Jesus began speaking publicly, He said: *"The time promised by God has come at last! The Kingdom of God is at hand! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!"* (Mark 1:15). When you read through the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), Jesus speaks again and again (115 times!) about *"the Kingdom of God"* (*Kingdom of Heaven* in Matthew). For Jesus, His mission - God's mission - is intimately connected with this concept. In fact when He teaches us to pray, He says, *"Pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven ...'"* (Matthew 6:9-10).

What is a "Kingdom"? By definition a Kingdom is territory ruled by a King. Jesus is specifically talking about whatever is ruled by God, the King of Kings. At one level, all of creation has always been, is now, and always will be the Kingdom of God: God was, is and always will be the ultimate power in all creation. But at another level, much of creation here on earth and certainly many, many people refuse to acknowledge God as King, do not see themselves as citizens of His Kingdom, and rebel against the idea of living as His subjects. We all know people who reject God and certainly do not obey His Kingdom principles, ethics and values - things like *"love your neighbour as yourself,"* care for the poor, justice for all, and the Ten Commandments.

Jesus' mission is to re-establish the reality of the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in Heaven. He doesn't come as a military dictator demanding submission and obedience. He doesn't come with threats and intimidation, demanding an outward show of loyalty and superficial allegiance. Instead He comes with an invitation - to allow God to be the King in your heart, in your mind, in your life, in your home, in your choices, in your journey ... *"The Kingdom of God is within you / among you / in your grasp"* (Luke 17:21). God's Kingdom truly exists where the Spirit truly reigns and has effective control: in the lives of those who love Him, desire to do His will, and choose to live as His people.

This is the secret of the Kingdom of God. It is a kingdom unlike any other. It is a kingdom based on love, not fear. It is a kingdom based on a personal relationship with the king, not citizenship inherited by birth. It's a kingdom of the heart, not of geography. As such, it's a kingdom that transcends space and time; it exists as a fourth dimension, superimposed above the nations of our world. And so, as the kingdoms of this world gradually wind down, the kingdom of God grows, person-by-person as individuals respond to the King.

This was hard for people in Jesus' day to understand! They knew about kingdoms! They knew about fear. They knew about citizenship. We know about countries, governments, and citizenship, too. What Jesus is saying is hard to understand! So Jesus, as was his habit, chose to explain himself through stories/metaphors - *"The kingdom of God is like ..."*

## *The kingdom of God is like ... soil! (Mark 4:1-20)*

Jesus tells a parable about different kinds of soil upon which a farmer spread some seed. It's the only one of Jesus' parables framed at both ends with an urgent command to "*Listen! ... Hear!*" (4:3, 9). This is one parable Jesus really wants us to get! In the Kingdom of God all sorts of different people will hear the good news. They will hear Jesus' call to repent (turn their lives around and live lives worthy of their calling as subjects of the King) and believe (put their faith in Jesus as their Saviour).

Some listen, but they don't hear. It doesn't even sink in. Whether it's the constant tramp of life-long habits that these people don't want to change, or the deliberate attempt to resist entertaining the possibility the gospel might be true, they are like hard ground.

Some hear it, and get excited about it, but when problems come, there are no roots. For some people, Christianity is an exhilarating emotional experience, but the necessary depth and maturity never develops. So when challenges come, these people wither.

Some hear it, and begin to grow, but before they bear any fruit, "*the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things*" choke out the life that has begun (4:19). We live in this dichotomy of beings in this world but not of it - sometimes we are lured into being so much "in it" that we forget our dual identity.

Some hear the message and respond! Notice there are actually three types of soil here - some that produces 30-fold, some 60-fold, some 100-fold. A good return in those days was 10-fold, so all of these are bumper crops!

Jesus' point is that when the Kingdom of God sinks into a person's life - if it isn't overwhelmed by trouble or choked out by an over-concern for wealth and possessions - is going to change us! We will be radically different people if we allow God's truths to sink into our lives!

In what ways? We have a whole different perspective on life! We look at the world differently - it is God's art gallery and worthy of our care. We look at people differently - each one is a unique, precious creation in God's own image. We look at our vocation differently - it does not define who we are, it is our opportunity to use the gifts and abilities with which God has blessed us. We look at our families differently - they are gifts entrusted to us by God; we are responsible to nurture and raise them in the knowledge and love of God. We look at our possessions differently - they, too, are gifts given to us by God that we need to exercise responsible stewardship over. We look at how we live differently. We will have a different way of living. When God's truth sinks into our lives we want to live according His principles, guidelines, and commands.

We look at our own mortality differently - recognizing that this life is just the beginning of an eternal life that will one day, someday, lead us to heaven to dwell in the very presence of God!

The harvest is incredibly rich! Our lives, when God's Spirit becomes part of them, will be infinitely richer because of God's presence! But it takes a whole-hearted commitment. *"I plead with you to give your whole beings to God..."* begs Paul (Romans 12:1). Matthew, right after he records this story, quotes Jesus telling another short parable about a farmer who sowed seed, only to have his enemy come and plant weeds among the wheat (Matthew 13:24-30). We don't have to be perfect, but we do have to be watchful!

How are you doing at being good soil?

- Are you growing deep roots? *"Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise"* (Philippians 4:8).
- Are you committed to Jesus for the long haul? *"Pursue righteousness and a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness. Fight the good fight for the true faith. Hold tightly to the eternal life to which God has called you"* (1 Timothy 6:11-12)
- Are you seeking to cultivate the fruit of God's Spirit - *love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control* - in your life? What can you still work on? (Galatians 5:22-23)

*The Kingdom of God is like ... plants growing* (Mark 4:26-29)

Jesus uses another metaphor to describe what the kingdom of God is like: when you plant your garden, you go about your business, and behold, plants bud, grow, and mature! Of course we can scientifically explain how this happens! But we rarely analyze our gardens in laboratory terms. And we even more rarely reflect on the One who created the wonderful natural order in the first place! We go about our lives, and plants just ... grow!

One of the things that happens in our lives as followers of Jesus is that we grow - or we should grow! To grow plants from seeds there are some necessary prerequisites, like water, sunlight, and adequate nutrients in the soil. Spiritually, there are some necessary prerequisites, too - reading the Bible, praying, worshiping, talking and studying with other Christians ... At the time, we may not feel that much is changing. But our faith does grow. When the challenges of life come, we find ourselves responding differently than we used to. We are more patient, kind, and gentle. We find our trust really is in God; we worry less. When temptations come we recognize them for what they are, rather than simply going along with everyone else. Our values, attitudes, and relationships mature ...

We are "growing" all the time, whether we realize it or not. Although we may not be conscious of it, the TV shows we watch, the magazines and books we read, and the music we listen to all affect who we are, what we think, and how we live! Advertisers, of course, know this and exploit it shamelessly! That's the dark side. The bright side is that the good things we expose ourselves to - Scripture, worship, prayer, etc. - influence us even more powerfully (because the Holy Spirit works through them). Again, we may not be conscious of their effects, but their influence is real. But we need the exposure! *The challenge is not whether or not we are "growing" - but who are we growing into? Who are we becoming?*

*"Don't copy the behaviour and customs of this world," writes Paul, "but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is."* (Romans 12:2). God does change us! That's part of the good news of the Kingdom of God!

What "crop" or "fruit" do you think Jesus wants to see growing in your life?

*The Kingdom of God is like ... a mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32)*

One tiny, insignificant seed can produce incredible results. Jesus is reiterating the incredible potential of people in the Kingdom of God. You could look at Jesus' ministry itself - just three years of itinerant teaching in an obscure corner of the Roman Empire - and expect it to have come to nothing. Yet what results!

The same may be true in our lives. We may feel rather tiny and insignificant in the global scheme of things. Are our lives important? Are they making any difference? Surely there is something more?

God has given each one of us an indispensable role to play in His kingdom. There is no one too tiny, or too insignificant that He cannot use us! You are the only one with your unique set of relationships, opportunities, experiences and gifts. Perhaps through our prayers for someone else, God will use us. Perhaps through our reactions to the challenges or struggles of our lives, God will use us. Perhaps through the things we do or the words we say, God will use us. We may or may not see the full-grown tree that will grow from our lives. But whether we do or not, God can and will - and does - use us.

We were not brought into this world to help God out of a mess. God, above all, is the One who is working. He is the force of growth. And if He privilege us with the chance to add to that growth, that is His gift to us, not ours to Him. It is so helpful to keep that in perspective.

*"Bloom where you're planted,"* some wise pundit said. That's good advice to live by!

*The kingdom of God is alive and well!*

*"Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need,"* says Jesus (Matthew 6:33). The potential is incredible - what the Holy Spirit can do in you and through you ... we cannot begin to imagine! But Jesus does not force anyone to be part of the Kingdom of God. He gathers His people not by fear, but by love. Lord, help us to grow deep roots, hang in there, grow strong, and we can bear much fruit.