

Prelude: Pastorale by Joseph Jongen played by John Crombie

Words of welcome:

In a time when people are tense and nerves are strained; in a time when things are changing, and changing some more and no one knows what next week will look like, we remember that Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever and we give thanks to God.

Hymn: Give thanks with a grateful heart (180)

Prayer

Lord God, when we are weak, you give us your strength. When we are poor or poor in spirit you give us your riches. When we are blind you give us your sight to lead us forward, and we thank you. The words “thank you” can seem too weak to do justice to our gratitude to you, so we thank you too that you see into our hearts and know, even as we sometimes do not, how much we appreciate all that you are, all that you have done for us in Jesus and all that you do for us day by day through yours Spirit.

In challenging times, help us to be strong in faith, looking to you, waiting for you to lead us, trusting you to hold not only our little selves, but all we hold dear and more in your loving hands.

So hear us as we pray as Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father who art in heaven hallowed by 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 debts as we forgive our debtors.

And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever. Amen.

One of the effects of the enforced changes in being church that the Coronavirus pandemic has brought us, is to raise again the question of what as Christians we are supposed to be for. Are we just a social club that gathers on a Sunday? Or is there more to it than that? In the next few weeks we are going to be looking at some of the things that Jesus said about the kingdom of heaven (which is the phrase that Matthew uses, while Mark and Luke say kingdom of God) to learn again from him what is really important.

Reading: Matthew 5:1-10

The poor in Spirit, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. To them belong the kingdom of heaven. These surely include the little, the least, the lowest and the despised. Although the reward is great, it is not a group of people which many of us would aspire to join. And yet we may find ourselves in it. Certainly these are not those who set themselves up and make much of themselves. They are not those who make the loudest noise; not those who think or act as though might is right.

In a world of protests and riots – and the two are not the same thing – how should we think on these beatitudes, which give the kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake? Would Jesus approve of the protests? Would he join in? Would he even lead the movement? In fact something like that was what people hoped that he would do. They hoped that he would say that their cause was righteous and lead the protests (armed if need be, with riots if need be). But instead Jesus talked about the kingdom of heaven.

So is this a get-out clause that means that we needn't care about what goes on in the earth and in the world around us? That we needn't care about the difficulties and injustices in our neighbours' lives? Should we congratulate the oppressed, the out-of-favour in our world for being poor in spirit, and so having a reward promised in the life to come?

That would be too easy and is what in effect Christians with power have done for far too long. But "kingdom of heaven" does not refer to the next life, but to God's rule and reign wherever and whenever that is to be found. "The kingdom come," we pray. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." So no, it's not about a reward in the sweet by and by.

One of the things we are going to discover as we look at what Jesus had to say about the kingdom, is that our calling as citizens of God's kingdom is to bless our neighbour. That will mean different things at different times and in different places. It may mean joining those who protest and helping their voice be heard – their voice their point of view, not yours. But the protest Jesus led was the one which culminated in the cleansing of the temple. Jesus knew that the political changes people hoped he would bring would be only superficial unless hearts were changed first. And so his priority was first of all to clear up the religion which bore his Father's name. He wanted to change people from the inside out, not just to make superficial change.

If people learned to see everyone they meet, of whatever colour or background, ability or orientation as bearing the image of God, then societal norms and inequalities would have a far better chance of being fundamentally changed. To bless our neighbours might involve helping them protest. But it may mean, even before this, it may, maybe should, mean *listening* to our neighbour to know what their point of view is, and what is the experience and understanding of life which fuels and informs it. It definitely means not assuming that we know and understand what others experience in life.

The poor in spirit to whom belong the kingdom are not those who say, "I know how you feel." They are those who say, "Tell me about it," and who weep with those who weep.

Hymn: Blest are they, the poor in spirit (341)

Reading: Psalm 103:1-5

In the Psalm God is given thanks and blessed because he gives blessing: God sees the needs of his people and meets them. The needs which God is blessed for and praised and thanked for are not just the obvious ones. You know, the food and warmth and shelter. He is thanked for forgiveness. How badly we all need to know ourselves forgiven: both so that we can go on with our lives positively, but also so that we know how to forgive others and diffuse what could become growing levels of tension and hostility. God is thanked for healing our diseases, redeeming life from the Pit and crowning us with steadfast love and mercy. God gives us the knowledge that we are loved and special to him, that he will keep us safe and give us purpose and these are the gifts we most need to receive in our lives. If we are to be a blessing to others, as God blesses us, then we should be asking God to channel his love and forgiveness through us. That's what it means to be a child of God. And children are important to God, as we will see.

Reading: Matthew 18:1-7

If the kingdom of heaven is given to the poor in spirit and those who are persecuted for righteousness sake – not just those who are persecuted, but who are persecuted for standing in the right - we are now told who is the greatest in God's kingdom. And of course it is not those who are the greatest in the "normal" world. No, in God's rule and realm it is children.

Children – who were in those days the unconsidered least and lowest. There is a reason that there is a UN charter of human rights for children – because too often still they

are the ones who are allowed to suffer the most, or to have their interests ignored. In Jesus' days children grew up expecting nothing other than to come last in the family plans, last in the synagogue and last in society at large. It wasn't that children were unloved, but they were not given any special place or any rights. After all, many of them sadly died. That was sad, as it still is in many places, and so society learns not to invest too heavily in such a fragile asset.

And Jesus says that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven are the children and those who are like them: those who do not expect to be made much of. People who are vulnerable – we have heard a lot about the vulnerable in this pandemic. Those who do not think of themselves as great. If they are the greatest in God's kingdom, are we being asked to make a great fuss about them? No we are not.

What Jesus asks of us is not to make a fuss of God's children, to honour them by first of all simply letting them be. He called a child and put him or her among the disciples and said: be like this. Until we can be like that child, we will not know what it is the God values. If we try to change that child to be more like us, we may destroy something of God in him or her.

“First do no harm” is the principle taught to students in the various healthcare disciplines, and it seems to be Jesus' instruction to his followers as well. Maybe it is something which should be taught to students for the ministry, as well as to Sunday School teachers, Bible Study leaders and others. But it is not just those who have a teaching role who need to remember to do no harm. All of us, as we go about our lives meet people who have a seed of faith in their hearts. It may be little more than a hope that this is not all there is; it may be a desire to believe more than faith itself; it may be as tiny as a mustard seed: but when we meet it in our neighbours, if we are to be a blessing to them we must first of all do no harm to that faith. Whether we are meeting with children or with those who have childlike disposition, whether it looks like our own faith or not, where there is faith in God, we must do it no harm.

That doesn't mean that we shouldn't in time attempt to help them grow in that faith, to deepen it, to rely on it and learn to trust the God in whom their faith is rooted: but first of all we must seek to learn from it and take care not to damage it. We are to do them no harm: to make sure that we do nothing to disturb their simplicity of faith.

The kingdom of heaven, the thing which Jesus thought was important, the rule and reign of God which begins in each of our hearts is to be found in the poor in spirit – who do not expect to be noticed. It is found in those who are quietly faithful in doing the right thing, even when it is difficult or unpopular. It is honoured in children and those who are vulnerable and meek like them. And in God's servants it calls out the response that we should live to bless our neighbours. We should look out for them, listen to them, notice them first. And before you seek to do good, make sure that first of all you do no harm. These are not flashy, headline-grabbing initiatives or actions. As we look at what Jesus taught about the kingdom of heaven, we will find that flashy and headline-grabbing is not part of it at all. But it is part of what we are called to and what will change the world.

Hymn: Says Jesus “Come and gather round” (342)

Prayers:

Lord God, our prayer to you is always that we should be a blessing to those around us: a blessing to our neighbours. Forgive us when our well meaning attempts to do this mean that we hinder your light from shining through us, as we try to do things in our own strength. Give us the humility to listen, to you and to others, and to let what we hear be the voice of your Spirit, helping us to bring the blessing which is directly from you.

Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for those who need your blessing badly in these days. We pray for those who are strained and stressed; for families which have to be apart, and families which have to be too much together; for people who have to work too hard and people who wonder when they will ever work again. Lord in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We bring to you the unfairness and injustice in our society. We know that we who have usually been on the privileged side of the equation cannot be the solution. We ask for humility, to give and give up, and the grace to remember that Jesus always sided with those who were on the receiving end of unfair treatment. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray for the governments which lead us, that you would give wisdom, humility, patience and perseverance. We pray for the part that your church can play in helping set the tone of a nation and ask that when we are given this privilege it would be your tone of sacrificial love which is set. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

And we pray for your church as she seeks to set your course in this changed world, finding our purpose, discovering how best to serve you, planning for our unknown future. Give us your leading and guidance. And we pray you also give guidance and joy to our brothers and sisters in Libis and Kostelec in the Czech Republic. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer.

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Hymn: Lord, You have come to the seashore (532)

Benediction

May the Lord bless you and keep you
May the Lord make his face to shine upon you
And be gracious to you.
May the Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you
And give you peace.
Amen.

Postlude