

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

KINGDOM AND CHURCH

18th March 2018

Isaiah 61:1-4

Luke 7:18-28

I wonder if you know or can guess what word appears three times in the Gospels and one hundred and eleven times in the rest of the New Testament? The word is Church. Church, the gathering of the faithful, the congregation, the convocation, is scarcely mentioned in the Gospels, scarcely mentioned by Jesus. But it is a very prominent term in the rest of the New Testament, as the followers of Jesus were getting organised and spreading across the Roman world. There is another word which is used a lot in the Gospels, one hundred and nineteen times, to be precise (concordances are great things), but which crops up less than thirty times in the rest of the New Testament. That word is Kingdom, as in kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven.

Jesus doesn't seem to have seen himself as coming to set up a church, but to inaugurate God's kingdom on earth. When Mark introduces us to Jesus, the very first words that he lets us hear Jesus speak are, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe the good news." This sets the tone for his ministry, this alerts us to the fact that the things we will see him doing in the pages of the Gospels and the words we will hear him speak are all about showing and bringing in God's kingdom. Jesus is all about letting God break in on the world in a new way.

And so, when the disciples of John come to him to ask if he really is the one they have been expecting, because he isn't doing the things they expected, things like leading a revolt against the Romans, Jesus sent them back with an object lesson. He reminded them that the blind were seeing, the deaf hearing, the lepers were healed, even the dead could be raised and that the poor were hearing good news. That was the message to John, and in Jesus' words, as well as in the deeds that underlie his words, we hear more than an echo of the prophecy of God's kingdom in Isaiah. He was telling John's disciples that it was their expectations which were wrong, but he was in fact doing the work of God's kingdom. That passage from Isaiah was important to Jesus: it was the one he chose to read to the synagogue in Nazareth earlier in his ministry, finishing with the words "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." It was a text which he obviously thought about a lot and took to heart when planning his ministry.

In the Gospels Jesus proclaims and enacts the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. His vision, seen in the times when he commissions his disciples to go and do his work, seems to be that his followers will do what he does: they will go where they are needed, teaching and healing, and living the values of God's kingdom, which include showing that the despised people of the world – and the "poor" were generally despised – mattered and would be lifted up by the coming of God's kingdom. He doesn't seem to have thought about how such disciples would be

organised, how they would find mutual support, how they would work out what they should or shouldn't be doing. It was all about the breaking in of the kingdom of God, and so he scarcely mentions the church. So, what is the connection of God's kingdom with the church? Because if there isn't one, then it would seem that we have small right to call ourselves followers of Jesus.

We read from Luke's gospel this morning. The same story appears in Matthew, with very few differences, but I thought we should read it from Luke, because it is Luke who as well as writing a gospel, also writes about the foundation and formation of the Church. He wrote the book of Acts – the Acts of the Apostles, as it is fully titled - as a kind of volume two of his gospel. In Acts first of all the apostles, the disciples, and then, as time goes on, the embryo Church, like Jesus, preaches, teaches, heals, cares, challenges and builds community. Jesus' followers take on all aspects of the Kingdom of God that are seen in Jesus' ministry.

Enacting the kingdom of God, furthering the kingdom of God, is what the Church is all about. It is why we pray "Your kingdom come your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The book of Acts shows us the Church doing this, alongside working out how they might be organised, how different people might take on different roles in doing the work of the kingdom. So we see the appointment of deacons, who are to oversee the fair distribution of food to those in need, which will free up the apostles for the work of proclaiming the good news. And we see the great council of Jerusalem, when they had to decide if citizenship in the kingdom of God would include the necessity of keeping all the Jewish purity laws. They couldn't decide that right at the beginning of the story – they couldn't decide it on the day of Pentecost, because at that point the question had not arisen, and no one had realised that it would arise. Jesus had enough to do going to his own people, with a few exceptions, and the people who were converted in their thousands on the day of Pentecost were all from a Jewish background. How could they know that within a few years, the spread of the kingdom would have pushed into gentile lands and lives? It would be like expecting parents of their first new baby already knowing how they were going to cope when their child developed into a teenager with a mind of his or her own!

Before that happened, the believers had had to face persecution from the Jews, which they might not have fully expected. Circumstances scattered what had looked like being a tight-knit little body. And so, they had to move and change and organise and re-organise as the circumstances also moved and changed. But always their goal was to teach and live the kingdom of God. Always the goal was to bring good news to the poor, to those who needed it. Good news in word and in deed.

The Church is the instrument of the kingdom. Yes, sometimes we have to think about how we operate, and what our structures are, but that is not what we are for. We are not here simply to be, to exist. Our goal is the spread of Kingdom of God. Today/next week we will hold our stated annual meeting of the congregation, which is something that our structure requires of us so that we can give an account of ourselves and our work to each other. But it is not why we are here today/why we will meet next week. Our goal is the kingdom of God. When we get hung up on structures, on doing things right, on changing the format, we should remember that our structures are supposed, *supposed*, to help us work towards our goal. They are not supposed to be what we are about. We are not supposed to spend all our energy maintaining structures, whether that means the central councils and committees of the church, or Presbytery, or the Kirk Session. All of these structures should be about sustaining, promoting and growing the kingdom of God.

So, as we review our congregation's life and work at our annual meeting, maybe we should be asking ourselves this: How much of our churches' current activity is in essence asking others to come to us and how much involves us "incarnating" the Gospel in our community? In other words, are we seeing to attract people to what we already are and do, or are we looking at the world in which we live, this local world first of all, and asking where we need to be so that the presence of God's kingdom can be known?

That is a difficult shift in thinking for most of us to make. We grew up in an age when we came to church, and we still do. But just as the early church had to work out how to best spread the good news of God's kingdom in the changing circumstances of its early years, so we have to realise that we are moving into uncharted territory, going off the map. The days we live in are not the days we grew up in and not the days that the Church, this church or any other, has ever lived through before. The things that helped the church live the kingdom in the past will not always be the things that will help us now. We can't just keep insisting on yesterday's solutions, without listening to today's questions.

We are the Church, but that is a word which carries connotations, whether we like them and agree with them or not. The idea of Church tends in these days to be seen as a connection to the past. There is a lot of past for us to be connected to, some good and some less so. But when we think of the kingdom of God, we stop looking to the past, and look forward. For the work of God's kingdom is to bring in the coming reign of God. Thinking of our calling as that of agents of God's kingdom, to teach and live it, helps us to look forward, helps us to cope with the new world which the Church finds itself in.

There is, or should be, no dichotomy between the kingdom of God and the work and being of the Church. But as we set out to live as followers of Jesus, maybe we should hold before our eyes the words from Isaiah which lived with him.

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed.
To bind up the broken-hearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives,
And release to the prisoners;
To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

Amen.

--- 000 ---