

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

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Micah 4:1-4

Luke 17:20-37

There are times when I read the Bible, when I would just love to know what tone of voice people used when they said certain things. When were they in anguish and when were they joking? When were they in earnest and when were they sarcastic? When I read about the Pharisees asking Jesus when the kingdom of God was coming I wonder how they asked.

You see, if it were a straightforward question, asked because they wanted an answer and thought Jesus could give them one, then their asking it of Jesus meant that they were taking him seriously. It would mean that they thought he was, if not the Messiah himself, probably the fore-runner of the Messiah - much as John the Baptist had thought. It would mean that there were some among the Pharisees who were not totally hostile to Jesus, but who were coming to respect him and even to think that he was sent by God.

But what if they were being sarcastic? What if it was a case of "You seem to know so much, so how about this one: when's God's kingdom actually coming then? You talk about it a lot, so when are we going to see it?"

It would be nice to know how they asked it, but it doesn't really matter. You see, Jesus made clear that however it was asked, it was the wrong question. The thinking behind the question, standard Jewish thinking of the time, was still that the kingdom of God would come suddenly and politically, probably with military might behind it. And when that kingdom movement started, that would be the time to get on board, when there was a cause to join in.

They read prophecies like the one we read today from Micah, and they understood it to say that there would come a time when God would make everyone turn to Israel, when Israel would be the world's super-power, they just had to be patient and wait till they saw it happening, and then they could be part of it.

In a way they saw it a bit like waiting for a train to arrive. You stand on Newtonmore platform, and there is no sign that there is anything at all moving on the railway, and of course it is an un-staffed station, so it is sometimes just you there and no one else. Eventually the tannoy clears its throat and announces that your train is on its way - so you know that it is in Kingussie, or maybe half-way from Dalwhinnie, depending which way you are going. Mentally you get ready. Maybe you gather your bags together. But it still isn't here. You still can't get on. And then you see it approaching, slowly, and when it finally stops at the platform, you can get on board. That was how the Jews of Jesus day saw God's kingdom. There would be signs that it was coming, but you couldn't do anything about it until it arrived.

But as we have heard Jesus say in his parables, it's not like that. It's not something which in its beginnings people can point to and say "Here comes God's kingdom, let's get on board." It is, says Jesus, within or among you. That is you, plural. "Youse lot" as we might say in the vernacular. The kingdom of God is within youse lot. Texans might say "The kingdom of God is among y'all."

The fact of the wrong question being asked tells Jesus again that most of his own generation are not going to find the way into the kingdom of God. They are too busy looking for the wrong thing. And so he tells his disciples that things will get very bad for him, and for them. There will be times when they won't be able to see any signs of the God's kingdom at all. There will be much suffering, for him, for them; there will be untold rejection. But when the fulfilment of the kingdom comes, there will be no doubt about it. Only, then it will be too late to get on board. The fulfilment of the kingdom will belong to those who are **already** on board. The kingdom is amongst you: it is there to be part of now. It is there for us to join and help advance, now. It

belongs to those who are prepared to lose their lives.

Those who are prepared to lose their lives. Jesus says this in the context of talking about a lot of difficult times which he and his disciples are going to see. The context is of great uncertainty, a time when you don't know when one person will be snatched away by the enemy and another left. (Jesus is not talking here about when Christians are called away from the earth to meet him in the sky: this is a more mundane and sinister taking, to do with guerrilla warfare and human enmity.) The context is one where you might be tempted to hide away indoors - but indoors will be the least safe, because you can't escape; when you might be tempted to draw away from others and live to yourself. But the kingdom belongs to those who are prepared to lose their lives. It is among you. It is where people are living for others, not for themselves. It is where people are not insisting on their own needs and rights, but seeking to give to others, to help others, to make things better for others.

'When is it coming' is the wrong question, because in the lives of such people, in the communities of such people, it is already here and at work.

The disciples hear all that Jesus has to say about the hard times which he will face and they will face because their world is asking the wrong question, the "when" question, and they have a question of their own. "Where, Lord?" And lo and behold that is the wrong question too. Where? They're still thinking of the kingdom's fulfilment, and that is not what should be asked about, not if you want to be part of it when it comes. If you ask where, just as much as if you ask when, then the answer is that you will only see it when it is too late: just as finding a corpse when the birds are after it is no use to the person who has died. "Where" is still thinking of God's kingdom as a locational entity, just like Badenoch or Strathspey. And God's kingdom is not to be found in one geographical place - this was a very radical idea for the Jews - it is to be found among you, within a community of people.

The kingdom of God is to be found where people live God's way: literally, live as God does. And Jesus himself is the one who shows us what that is. When he first came preaching and teaching he said "Repent, the kingdom of God is at hand" and he meant himself. The way he was going to live among the people, the way he was going to put himself out for others, to model God's love and forgiveness, God's patience and persistence, that is the first indication of God's kingdom,

The way that Jesus was prepared to keep with what he was doing: being prepared to lose his life, daily, by not living for himself, thinking of his own needs, or desires, but of what others needed from him, that was the kingdom of heaven. The way he tried to get his disciples to live and work together, as a unit, as people looking out for each other, that was the kingdom of heaven. From that sprang the healings and acts of power that he did, the more spectacular manifestations of God's kingdom at work. But God's kingdom didn't begin with these. It was already established in Jesus, in his followers when things happened that people could see.

People sometimes still approach the church or even God himself with the question "What can you do for me?" Again that's the wrong question for anyone who wants to be part of what God is doing in the world. "Those who lose their life will keep it." The kingdom of God is there for those who are prepared to reach out and join in. But it's not a spectator sport, and it's not for those who are looking to get something for themselves from it. That's not to say that nothing is given to those who join in - far, far from it. But those who join in looking for themselves will find nothing. The whole secret is to join to keep giving: giving of yourself, your time, your energy, your interest, your intellect, your money, your security, even your peace of mind. Those who join in which this frame of mind haven't time to keep looking for the final fulfilment of the kingdom.

And, you might say, it sounds like they won't have time for anything else and that they will soon become a collection of basket-cases, because they will wear themselves out doing and giving for others. That sometimes happens, but it shouldn't. It shouldn't because the kingdom of God is found in community. It is within you, among you lot. It is in a community of people who look out for each other. St. Paul told his readers in Galatia that they must *"bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ."* (Galatians 6:2). Citizens of God's kingdom look out for each other as well as attending to the needs of those who are outside the kingdom.

Life is a lot more fun that way as well. People who spend their whole time thinking about themselves, looking out for number one, demanding their own rights are usually not very happy people. But when we work together there is a chance for laughter. When we learn to look out for each other there is an end to loneliness. When we learn from other people and become part of their lives we experience more than we could ever have dreamed of.

The questions which we should ask of God's kingdom are not when, or even where. The question we should be asking is how can I be part of it? How can I make it happen for others? That's what Jesus did, and he called us to live in his way.

Amen