

St Brides Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

THE BEGINNING OF THE KINGDOM

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Matthew 11:1-15

Isaiah 35

When Jesus began his ministry, we are told that he set out proclaiming that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of Heaven had come. As he taught and healed, told stories and worked wonders; as he was opposed and suffered, he always was showing the kingdom of God. As he invited people to follow him, he was inviting them into the kingdom. Still he invites us to live in the kingdom of God. So what is it? What do we know about it? What did Jesus think it was? In the next few weeks we will be looking at some aspects of what Jesus taught about God's Kingdom which he came to bring; in which, as his followers, we live.

The kingdom of God wasn't a phrase which Jesus made up. It was common currency in his country. It was eagerly expected. Jesus took the expectations and gave them a radical overhaul. John, now languishing in prison thought he knew what it was. He thought he knew what it should look like, what Jesus should be doing and how he should be acting to bring it in. The prophets had said that before God's kingdom came the prophet Elijah (or one like him) would appear and John wanted Jesus to be that one. He expected a bit more fire in his words, a bit more denunciation. After all this was what the prophets had always done. They had always looked around at the land they lived in and rebuked the people for doing wrong, for breaking God's laws, for following their own inclinations. They had rebuked the people, but most often they had focussed primarily on the leaders, who were leading the people astray.

John had done that. He had done it so well that people had flocked to hear him, that the leaders had questioned him, and that he had ended up where many a prophet before him had found himself: in prison, waiting for something worse. John had seen himself as working with Jesus. Jesus was to be better, he was just the warm-up act, but they went together.

If you go to see a show or a concert which has a warm-up act, you can be reasonably sure that the warmers-up will be in a similar vein to the main performers. You wouldn't have serious drama preceded by a foul-mouthed stand-up comic. You wouldn't precede a rock concert with a classical quartet. Your warm-up act is to get the audience in the mood for the main event, and that was what John had tried to do for Jesus. But Jesus wasn't following the script which John had imagined for him. He wasn't speaking in fiery tones about what was wrong. He wasn't getting rid of Herod and his ilk, and freeing his cousin from prison to a place of honour. He was as different from John as a Handel Oratorio is from a rock opera. Both are music, but that's about all.

John was puzzled. The audience, the people who had been attracted by John's prophetic style were puzzled too.

To change the musical metaphor, it was as if John thought that he and Jesus were playing a piece together, and had reached a place which was marked by the sign :ll, which means repeat, go back and do that section again. The prophets had played this music for many hundreds of years and they had always repeated this theme: to repent, to turn back to God, to watch out or God would get them. Surely if Jesus was the prophet like Elijah then he should play that section of the music with great fervour.

But Jesus doesn't play it at all. He has very little ever to say about the country's political leaders, though later he will address a few well-chosen remarks to the religious leaders. Jesus does not see himself as the fiery Elijah-like prophet - that's John. Elijah is to come before the kingdom of God can come in. But the kingdom has come with Jesus. Elijah has been.

How is John to know this? By the evidence. The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news brought to them. That's the evidence of God's Kingdom.

should be done, but Jesus shows, rather than tells what the kingdom is. The kingdom of God is seen in what he does.

It is still the same music, still the music of the prophets, but while John has repeated the section about judgement and condemnation, Jesus has look to other inspirations. He has looked, for instance, to Isaiah 35, which talks of what things will be like when the kingdom of God has come, and he has deliberately set about showing that it has arrived.

And John? He is the end of an era. Jesus is the beginning. John is the end of the overture while Jesus is the beginning of the opera. The Kingdom of God starts with Jesus. The preparation for it ends with John. That is why Jesus says that the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. There is just no comparison. They belong to different ways of being.

John was the greatest human prophet. He was the best prophet of the lot, and no mother could have asked for a greater son. But he didn't realise that he was the last. He didn't realise that this cousin of his whom he told people to listen to was not the one like Elijah - that was himself. He didn't realise that with Jesus something new was beginning.

Jesus did realise it. He was quite deliberate about it, which is why he answered John's doubtful questions as he did. And it is why he told the people that the least in God's kingdom was the greater.

That includes you. If you are a citizen of God's kingdom then you are, in God's eyes, greater than John the Baptist, who in human terms was, says Jesus, the greatest. Being a citizen of God's kingdom confers on you the greatness of the King, even if you are the least in God's kingdom.

So how do you know? How do we know where God's kingdom is and who is a citizen? Just the same way that Jesus told John what to look to, to see who he was. The citizens of God's kingdom are those who make things better, particularly for people who can't make things better for themselves.

God's kingdom brings sight to the blind - physical sight or insight to those who need to understand themselves or other people better. It brings mobility to the lame. How many people go through life having to favour a weak joint, till it gets to be part of them? And how many have some pain or disability in their past which is like a weak joint, something that they cannot get over, that stops them living life fully and freely? It can be the big things, like abuse or bereavement, or it can be a chain of smaller things which make us into a less than complete person. The kingdom of God, and Jesus its prince, and all its citizens work to bring wholeness to others.

In the same way the deaf hear, hear what they could not before - and in our land there are many who are partially deaf to God's message of love - and lepers are cleansed: again not just physical healing, but being brought in from being an outcast - as lepers necessarily had to be - to being part of a caring community. And the poor hear good news. All of these things are good news, and those who are poor, in worldly terms and in spiritual terms need good news. The kingdom of God, the presence of the kingdom of God is always good news to those who most need to hear it.

If as a church we are a kingdom community, then these should be our hallmarks - not just for those who gather week by week, but reaching out always to others. John told people what to do, to think, to expect. Jesus shows them what he will do for them, which will challenge them to follow him. The least in the kingdom of God will not do what John did. That had its place, but the music has moved on now. The least in the kingdom of God will seek, with God's help, to do as Jesus did, bringing good news where it is most needed, whether that is half way across the world or in our own community and our own homes.

We may not always succeed. We may in fact be the least in the kingdom. But even so, Jesus says that we are part of something that is greater than anything or anyone which came before him. For God's kingdom is not just in the future: we now live in it, in the present tense.

Amen