

Lincoln Cathedral

Proper 12A

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As some of you know my professional background is that of teaching and teacher education and I have spent many hours at the back of classrooms, either bored rigid or totally captivated, watching trainee teachers practise their skills as they try to break down complex material and make it comprehensible to a class, usually of not so enthusiastic learners. And I always told the students that if the pupils still look 'glaikit' (to use a Scottish term) they probably have not got the message and they have to try and find another way round explaining it.

So when I read the words of Jesus as he teaches the crowds in large groups or his disciples in the smaller group, or even when teaching individuals, I cannot help but view his words and techniques through the lens of a teacher. Roy Pitcher describes Jesus as a master teacher whose teaching was characterised by effective long-term creativity.

For the past three weeks the subject of his teaching has been the Kingdom of Heaven; the main teaching device Jesus used as he taught them was parables - first the sower and then last week the wheat and the tares growing up side by side. In today's Gospel readings he uses various analogies to try and give yet more angles to the subject (I wonder if his hearers looked glaikit and he realised he had to try another technique). Mark Oakley comments that when teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven Jesus never actually teaches what the Kingdom IS, rather, he talks about what it is LIKE. Tom Wright, on the other hand, sees the use of parables and analogies as absolutely necessary, because what he was doing was so different, so explosive and so dangerous in the society of the day. Mark Oakley says that, in using language like this, Jesus took people on a journey, leaving them wondering what on earth he meant and yet they were intrigued and drawn in by his parabolic language that hovered rather than came in to land. It is this play with language which makes Jesus' teaching irresistible. Oakley comments that if Jesus had written a well-thought out manifesto or mission statement we would have lost interest years ago. Well we have had our fill of manifestos recently, don't you think?

However, Jesus' hearers, who did not have the benefits of hindsight which we have, when they heard the term Kingdom, would be associating it with their political notions of a kingdom with a king who would overthrow their Roman oppressors and set them free. They were expecting a physical kingdom to appear in the 'here and now'.

Is that what Jesus meant? I believe he was illustrating two, inter-related kingdoms - first the equally subversive, explosive kingdom as evidenced through the counter-cultural behaviour of those who were to become his followers. But, secondly, he is indeed referring to a Kingdom which is yet to come, of which He will be the King of Kings, a Kingdom which shall have no end. The first two analogies, that of the mustard seed and secondly of the yeast would seem to suggest the former emphasis; that the kingdom starts as a small seed which grows; and indeed Christianity started with

a small band of followers but spread throughout the world and across generations. It also illustrates the fact that the kingdom of heaven consists in the small things that believers do, the way they live out their lives, the behaviours which set them apart from those not of the kingdom. I am reminded of the so-called 'Little Way' of Therese of Lisieux whose focus was on making a difference by doing the little things. She thought that the people of her day lived in too much fear of God (oh that that were our problem nowadays). She wanted people to realise that they were agents of God; she was conscious that everything she did in helping others was Jesus working in and through her. We might not be able to achieve great things but we can do all things through great love, to paraphrase Mother Theresa who was influenced by the work of Therese of Lisieux. And in so doing we are practising the priorities of the Kingdom.

The third and fourth analogies of the treasure and the pearl point to the fact that the kingdom is something of tremendous value, it was exclusive and that Jesus implied that it was so valuable that anyone finding it would have to give up everything to be part of it.

But, as a teacher, Jesus didn't just talk to his audience; he supplemented his stories and analogies by demonstrating what he was talking about; in other words he literally practised what he preached. Throughout the Gospels Jesus led them by example, quietly, gradually challenging their thought patterns and patterns of behaviour, and forcing them to think and to act out what it meant to bring about the Kingdom of Heaven, where the ruler is the servant, where the last shall be first, where people are valued, where justice is standard practice and where love prevails. And I believe that the imperative to infuse society with this different way, is as relevant for us as 21st century Christians.

Part of the problem modern day readers have with the notion of 'kingdom' is that there is no present-day equivalent. According to Alan Storkey we have difficulty linking governance with kings because in countries where there are kings, their role is as a ceremonial head of state and not involved in government, unlike the time in which Jesus lived where kings controlled people's lives. Storkey comments that our so-called United Kingdom is neither united nor a kingdom (writing this in 2005, was he a prophet?). A second problem we have with the concept of 'kingdom' is that we live in anti-authority days when we don't like being told anything, everyone is right in their own eyes, and the thought of anyone, especially a king, ruling over us is abhorrent to many, including some in the Church. And yet that is what we are signing up to when we come to God through Jesus - to accept his rule over our lives.

I sometimes attend, along with some of the people here, the Council of Christians and Jews which meets in Lincoln. We look at topics of mutual interest from both perspectives. It is fascinating that, invariably we arrive at the same place every time, as we recognise that we are both (that is Jews and Christians) waiting for the same thing - the arrival for the Jews of the Messiah and the return of the Messiah for Christians and both groups are expecting him to establish his kingdom. The Jews of today are waiting for exactly the same event which the hearers in Jesus' time were expecting at that time. It is absolutely intriguing to see both sides using the same language to refer to the same event but they appear to be doing it from two sides of a mirror.

And we are moving inexorably to the arrival of that physical kingdom. Things are happening internationally, politically and socially to the extent that, when I read or hear the news, I feel quite overwhelmed. Perhaps I am just getting old but I am beginning to doubt my own sanity. Things are being promoted, accepted and encouraged which quite simply beggar belief and no-one, including the Church, is saying anything against them for fear of persecution or prosecution, or just out of fear of being seen as irrelevant.

The sub-dean used the euphemism last week - we live in interesting times. It is my view that we are living in dangerous, disturbing and quite evil times. The bad news, I suspect, is that they are not going to get any better until the kingdom of Messiah appears, but the message of the Good News is that we are all called to demonstrate our citizenship of that kingdom NOW, by our words, actions and by putting into practice by love that Little Way of St Therese in preparation for being part of the great ingathering of the final analogy.

As Jesus with his words and teachings takes his hearers on a journey, perhaps the real voyage of discovery for us as we listen to him consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes to see our society in a new light (in the words of Marcel Proust). What we need is a new perspective, a new way of looking at ourselves, our role in society, our relationship to others, and to the earth and then we will recognise the new kingdom when it comes seamlessly but powerfully.

Jesus illustrated the kingdom by analogy and I want to finish with an analogy which has burned in my mind as I was preparing this. The TV Series *Broken* is about an inner city priest, played by Sean Bean; and it is an example of an ordinary Christian living out his life and vocation as a citizen of the Kingdom of God in a broken world. And one recurring incident when he is dealing with people in the most dire situations serves as an analogy for us Christians. The priest lights a candle and says - 'this is to remind us that Jesus is here with us in the midst of our pain'. And that image echoes the Sunday school hymn in my head - *Jesus bids us shine with a pure clear light, like a little candle, burning in the night. In this world of darkness so let us shine; you in your small corner and I in mine.* AMEN