

## The kingdom comes

**23 January 2011**

Well friends throughout history we've seen good kingdoms and bad kingdoms. We've seen mighty kingdoms and powerless kingdoms. We've seen kingdoms that lasted for centuries while others fizzled out in no time at all. Think of Israel under King David – a reign of conquest and blessing that lasted for decades. Or of Great Britain under Queen Victoria – a 60 year reign over a vast global empire. But then think of France under King Louis XIX – a king whose reign lasted only 20 minutes before he abdicated. Or of Monaco and the Grimaldis, who despite their wealth, rule a kingdom of no more than 2 km<sup>2</sup>.

The world's kings, queens and emperors have been an eclectic bunch. But all their kingdoms had certain features in common and it's helpful to today's sermon that we recognise what those features were:

- first, all those kingdoms had a ruler – whether a king, a queen or an emperor – they all had someone who was in charge
- second, they all had a place where that rule was exercised – these kingdoms were not infinite – there were boundaries to the area that was being ruled
- and third, they all had a people who were more or less willing to be ruled.

These have been the key ingredients of a kingdom since time began, and they remain so today.

But why does this matter? Well, in this morning's gospel reading, Matthew tells us about another type of kingdom, one which also has a ruler, a people and a place. But this kingdom is also different, because this kingdom is ruled by God, it is a kingdom that grows continually, and it is a kingdom that will last for all eternity. So let's turn to Matthew chapter 4 and see what we can learn about the kingdom of God and how we should respond to it.

The first thing that Matthew wants us to understand is that God's kingdom is not everywhere. God's kingdom, at least for now, is confined to a particular place. Let's look at verses 12 and following:

<sup>12</sup> When Jesus heard that John had been put in prison, he withdrew to Galilee.

<sup>13</sup> Leaving Nazareth, he went and lived in Capernaum, which was by the lake in the area of Zebulun and Naphtali— <sup>14</sup> to fulfill what was said through the prophet Isaiah:

<sup>15</sup> “Land of Zebulun and land of Naphtali,  
the Way of the Sea, beyond the Jordan,  
Galilee of the Gentiles—

<sup>16</sup> the people living in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
on those living in the land of the shadow of death  
a light has dawned.”<sup>[1]</sup>

<sup>17</sup> From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”

According to Matthew, the kingdom of God must start somewhere and that place is Galilee, in the land of Zebulun and Naphtali in northern Israel. It is here that Jesus will commence his ministry, and in so doing, fulfil an ancient prophecy from the prophet Isaiah, which forms today's OT reading. The prophecy foretells that a light will dawn on a people living in darkness, and Matthew now explains that this light will be made manifest in the person and ministry of Jesus.

But while the fulfilment of a 700 year old prophecy is a good thing, you may still ask, why here of all places? What makes this region of Israel so special that God would prophecy about bringing his kingdom near it? Well, the answer lies in the tragic history of this area and in the character of God.

For centuries, those living in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali had been exposed to political and military aggression from the north, as well as to destructive pagan influences. In 721 BC, Assyria had launched a devastating invasion of Israel, which saw thousands of Israelites in this region taken captive and then dispersed throughout the Assyrian empire.

So when Matthew says that the people in this region were 'living in darkness' and in 'a land in the shadow of death', he isn't just saying that they were spiritually lost. He is telling us that after centuries of bloodshed, violence and oppression, these people have become physically, spiritually and emotionally demoralised. They are despondent – without hope and desperately in need of help.

It's into this terrible situation that the kingdom of God now breaks. Because from this time on, Matthew says, Jesus begins to preach, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The kingdom that Jesus is bringing near, in his person and his ministry, will see a 'great light' dawn upon the people of this region. As Jesus preaches the word of God to them and they respond in faith, their hearts will be filled with the joy of salvation. Their spiritual and emotional darkness will be illuminated by the light of God. They will have new hope and a future in the kingdom of God.

But as much as the people of Galilee have been blessed by God – who has begun his kingdom in their very neighbourhood – we see that this isn't the full story, because God also expects a response. Jesus' first words to the people command them to 'repent'! This means that they are to turn away from all sin and wrongdoing and follow the commandments of God. Coming into God's kingdom will require a radical transformation of their lives. It will mean living life God's way, not the world's way.

For us today, the same disciplines apply. Now that the good news of the kingdom has spread from Galilee to Canberra, we too must heed Jesus' command to turn away from sin and wickedness and live our life God's way. We cannot claim to be a Christian if our life doesn't reflect our beliefs – such a position is just hypocrisy and you know how people love to expose hypocrisy among Christians. So if there are things in your life that are sinful and contrary to God's will, then repent of them now. Literally turn away from them.

For some of us, there may be sinfulness in relation to money – our attitude to it and how we chose to spend it. For others, the focus will be on the flesh – its passions and

desires. And for others the unrestrained tongue – bringing gossip, slander and lies. But regardless of the sin involved, God calls us to repent and be radically transformed.

In my spare time, which as a public servant is limited, I sometimes look at Wikipedia to read the profiles of famous people (mainly movie stars). When discussing their views on life and the universe, many of these people will say that they believe in the existence of God; but very, very few will talk of repenting of their sins and changing how they live.

Sadly, this is because most people's understanding of God is only academic – they're not seeking to have a relationship with God and they're not prepared to live life on God's terms. But this is a terrible mistake, which carries with it eternal consequences, because God calls people to repent and be radically transformed. This was a requirement for the Israelites to receive the kingdom of God back in Jesus' day, and it is still a requirement for you and me today.

Well having established that the kingdom of God will begin in a particular place, the second thing Matthew wants us to know is that the kingdom involves a willingness to be ruled by God. Let's look at verses 18 and following:

<sup>18</sup> As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. <sup>19</sup> "Come, follow me," Jesus said, "and I will send you out to fish for people." <sup>20</sup> At once they left their nets and followed him.

<sup>21</sup> Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, <sup>22</sup> and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him.

In these short few verses, Jesus calls out his first disciples. Jesus tells these fishermen to 'follow him' and they do so – leaving behind their work and in the case of James and John, their father as well. What is particularly striking throughout this passage is the persuasiveness of Jesus' call. Matthew says that the disciples leave 'at once' and 'immediately'. They don't stop and um and ah about the offer, or try and clarify their conditions of service – they drop what they are doing and follow Jesus there and then.

Another thing we should notice though is the second part of Jesus' call. Having told the men to follow him, Jesus then explains that they will be 'sent out to fish for people' or be 'fishers of men' depending on your translation. This means that the disciples won't simply listen and learn as they follow Jesus around the countryside, rather, they will take an active part in God's kingdom as fishers of men. Like Jesus, they too will teach people the good news of salvation. They too will command people to repent. And they too will help the light to dawn on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death. To be a disciple in the kingdom of God will require their active involvement, not passive observance.

And this leads us back to the concept of the kingdom. Because as we noted earlier, in God's kingdom, people must be willing to be ruled by God. As the disciples say 'yes'

to the call of Jesus and ‘yes’ to his promise to make them ‘fishers of men’, they show that they are willing to come under God’s rule. They are acknowledging that to truly enter the kingdom, they will have to do what God says.

For you and me today, this passage may seem a bit abstract. After all, Jesus is not walking through public service departments and calling people to leave their briefings and follow him. Also, very few of us are called by God to go into full time ministry. But it’s important we look past the earthly circumstances of this encounter and see God’s timeless call to each of us.

God continues to call all people to repent and turn to him in faith and obedience. God also continues to call his people to join in ministry and mission – to become fishers of men – just like the first disciples. So, if you’ve yet to respond to God’s call, I urge you to do so. We really are living in the last days and God’s offer of salvation won’t be extended forever – so repent now and come into the kingdom.

Equally, if you’ve said yes to the call, but not bothered to follow, it’s time to do so. God’s call is a call to be actively involved in kingdom ministry, not necessarily full time of course, but to do your bit nonetheless. And if you’re not sure what to get involved with, speak to Jason or other members of the parish council and ask what you can do to help. The opportunities are diverse and plentiful.

About a decade ago, Jason asked me what I was doing by way of ministry in the parish. He said to me, look, it’s ok to be taking in ministry but you also need to be giving something back. At the time, I think I was a bit indignant, as well as embarrassed, because I realised how true it was. I was enjoying the benefits of other people’s ministry to me, but hadn’t seen much need to do anything for anyone else’s benefit. And as I realise now, it’s this sort of attitude that holds the kingdom of God back and forces everyone else to work that much harder.

To be in God’s kingdom, Matthew shows us, means to say yes to God’s call, and then submit to his rule. It requires us to accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour and to follow him into ministry and mission for the benefit of others, just as the disciples did.

Finally, having showed us where the kingdom of God will begin and the necessity of coming under God’s rule, Matthew shows us what the kingdom looks like when God is in charge. Let’s look at verses 23 and following:

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. <sup>25</sup> Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, <sup>[a]</sup> Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

We saw in the first part of this passage that Jesus began to establish the kingdom of God by preaching the word and by commanding the people to repent of their sins. But in this section we see that there are other elements too. Jesus isn’t just preaching and

teaching now; he is also healing people of sickness and disease and casting out demons. But why?

Well, these works are a pointer to what the kingdom of God looks like. They are intended to show us that when God's rule is perfectly established over his people, there will be no place for any sickness, disease, deformity or demonic oppression. These things are characteristic of a fallen world under the dominion of Satan, but they will have no place in God's kingdom under God's rule.

When I read through this passage, I was reminded of the book of Revelation and the vision that God gives to John of the new heaven and the new earth. You may remember it well, it comes from chapter 21:

<sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death'<sup>[a]</sup> or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

<sup>5</sup> He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"

While we still await the new heaven and the new earth, Matthew gives us a wonderful foretaste of what is to come in God's kingdom when it is finally consummated. So if you've been wondering what heaven looks like, here's a glimpse.

But Matthew's not quite finished, because there is one other element to the kingdom of God that Matthew wants us to understand. And that is, that the kingdom of God will be open to all people everywhere.

You may recall from the first part of this reading that the kingdom of God began in a particular place at a particular time. The dawning of the light on a people in darkness was squarely located in Galilee. Therefore the good news of the kingdom, at least initially, was only for a select group of people. But look what's happening now:

<sup>24</sup> News about him spread all over Syria ... <sup>25</sup> Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,<sup>[a]</sup> Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

These details are important for two reasons. First, they show us that very early on Jesus was reaching out to people from well beyond Galilee. While the kingdom would begin in Galilee, it would not be confined there, it would grow into something much larger. Second, many of these regions (such as the Decapolis) had a significant Gentile population, which means that Jesus was ministering to people other than Jews. Taken together, we are meant to see that God's kingdom is a growing kingdom – which was always intended to encompass all kinds of people from all kinds of places.

For us today, this passage still has important lessons. One such lesson, I think, is that the church should follow Jesus' example and be involved in bringing God's healing and spiritual freedom to those who need it. While it's tempting to say, 'let's just preach the word', we need to remember that Christ was also concerned for people's physical and emotional well-being. In inaugurating God's kingdom, Jesus ministered

to people's needs in their entirety and I think we as a church, need to do the same. That's why I remain a strong supporter of the healing ministry here and elsewhere.

Second, we need to do everything we can to assist in the advancement of God's kingdom. We must never be ashamed of the gospel, and we must never think that God is not committed to reaching all people everywhere with the good news of salvation. For these reasons, both individually and as a church, we need to support those who are working to bring the gospel to people who have never heard it before. That's why we must continue to support our link missionaries, year in and year out, and be involved in every other kind of work that helps to extend God's kingdom.

When I was younger, I used to feel rather sorry for missionaries because they always seemed to be poor and I knew they mostly lived in very difficult circumstances in the 3<sup>rd</sup> world and had lots of children. Even today, I probably find myself thanking God I that I am a PK rather than an MK. But when we support our missionaries and their organisations, we shouldn't be doing so because we pity them; we should be doing so because we recognise how crucial their role is. Without missionaries, the word of God cannot go forth and the kingdom cannot grow. But grow it must – for the sake of people's eternal salvation in every corner of the globe.

Let me conclude. Matthew tells us that like all earthly kingdoms, God's kingdom has a ruler, a people who are under that rule, and a place where that rule is exercised. But God's kingdom is also different because it is ruled by the Lord of heaven and earth and it is a kingdom that will never pass away. We all know that the kingdom of God is yet to be perfected – that can't happen until Jesus returns in judgement and the new heaven and the new earth are ushered in.

But for now, let's remember what God the king expects of each of us. God expects that when we hear his call we will respond and follow him. God expects that we will allow him to transform us day by day into fishers of men – that is, disciples who submit to his rule and who are actively involved in the building of the kingdom. And God expects that, like the first disciples, we will commit ourselves to seeing his kingdom grow from beyond Galilee to the ends of the earth.