

[Embodying] God's Dream

Call to Worship

The kingdom of heaven slips between the cracks
in the meaning of words.

The language of this works cannot contain it.

In the depths of the ocean of our desperation it lies,
a pearl of enormous wealth.
It fills the cavern of our need.

It soothes the pain that fills the corners of a prison cell.
It pours into the cup of suffering passed around in an
upstairs room.

It is the immensity of small acts of compassion.
It is the sea of living water
contained in a single tear of our contrition.

It is the split second between the welling up of joy
and the eruption of laughter.
It is dancing to our own beat.

It is the wide eyes of a child.
It is the filling of our lamps with expectation
for the bridegroom at the end of time.

It is the seed for our hope of life.
It is here.
It is now.



*Alizon Sharun in Bare Feet and Buttercups,
Ruth Burgess (ed.), 2008, Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, p.75*

Readings

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13

³⁴ Then Samuel went to Ramah; and Saul went up to his house in Gibeah of Saul. ³⁵ Samuel did not see Saul again until the day of his death, but Samuel grieved over Saul. And the Lord was sorry that he had made Saul king over Israel.

The Lord said to Samuel, 'How long will you grieve over Saul? I have rejected him from being king over Israel. Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons.' ² Samuel said, 'How can I go? If Saul hears of it, he will kill me.' And the Lord said, 'Take a heifer with you, and say, "I have come to sacrifice to the Lord."' ³ Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what you shall do; and you shall anoint for me the one whom I name to you.' ⁴ Samuel did what the Lord commanded, and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling, and said, 'Do you come peaceably?' ⁵ He said, 'Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord; sanctify yourselves and come with me to the sacrifice.' And he sanctified Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶ When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, 'Surely the Lord's anointed is now before the Lord.' ⁷But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.' ⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab, and made him pass before Samuel. He said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' ⁹Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, 'Neither has the Lord chosen this one.' ¹⁰Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel, and Samuel said to Jesse, 'The Lord has not chosen any of these.' ¹¹Samuel said to Jesse, 'Are all your sons here?' And he said, 'There remains yet the youngest, but he is keeping the sheep.' And Samuel said to Jesse, 'Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.' ¹²He sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was handsome. The Lord said, 'Rise and anoint him; for this is the one.' ¹³Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him in the presence of his brothers; and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. Samuel then set out and went to Ramah.

Mark 4:26-34

²⁶ He also said, 'The kingdom of God is as if someone would scatter seed on the ground, ²⁷and would sleep and rise night and day, and the seed would sprout and grow, he does not know how. ²⁸The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head. ²⁹But when the grain is ripe, at once he goes in with his sickle, because the harvest has come.'

³⁰ He also said, 'With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? ³¹It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; ³²yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.'

³³ With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it; ³⁴he did not speak to them except in parables, but he explained everything in private to his disciples.

Hear what God's Spirit is saying to the church.

Thanks be to God.

Reflection

Let's pray...

God of our ancestors, God of Jesus Christ, you look beyond the surface and see deep into our very being. As we explore the stories of your people, as we immerse ourselves in the living word, help us to look beyond, to listen deeply, to look and listen for how and where you might be teaching us, leading us, nudging us. Amen.

What do you think God's kingdom is like?

Where is it? What is it?

Is it something that exists now or is it a description of an ideal that can never be reached?

Today's readings invite us to think about how God sees the world being ordered. "Kingdom" is not a word we use all that much in our time - particularly when we live in a country that has had a Queen as a Head of State for longer than most of us have been alive, and when the whole concept of being "ruled over" is not comfortably embraced.

So we do have to work a little bit to understand what we mean when we talk about the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven (depending on which Gospel you are reading).

And we might need to do some work around how we explain it to others - perhaps the English word "kingdom" no longer captures the full sense of God's reign. So we need to find language that does - you will have heard me talk about God's way, God's realm, God's dream, what God

intends or imagines for God's world. "Kin-dom" is a word that might work - capturing more of a sense of the relational nature of God's love for all peoples.

Whatever language we use, our understanding of this kingdom and our ability to speak about what it means and to embrace it, even embody it, is fundamental to who we are as followers of Jesus Christ in the world today.

Because it is into this kingdom, this way of being, that Jesus calls us.

It is radically subversive.

It is counter-cultural.

It challenges the power of money, politics and privilege.

It challenges the assumptions of what is valued or considered "normal".

And it replaces all of that with a community that cares equally for all its members, that honours and values each one, that shares everything, that ensures that all of creation is nurtured, that is guided by love, grace and mercy above anything else.

The story from 1 Samuel picks up with God seemingly responding to an experiment gone wrong.

God never intended for Israel to have a human king, it was never part of God's plan for them.

They had lived for many years under the leadership of judges and prophets.

But now they insisted on having their own king, one like the other nations had, a king that would rule over them, and presumably tell them what to do as well as win major battles for them, like other nations had. Did they not realise that such a one would inevitably be as flawed as they all were?

The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God relented to their demand, and within a short time, both God and God's people have discovered it was a bad idea.

The king that had been appointed, a man named Saul, was simply not cutting it (you can read the details in the first part of 1 Samuel).

But rather than abandon the plan, God sends Samuel to anoint another king, one that hopefully *would* listen to what God had to say.

And in the story of David's anointing, we again see echoes of this radical way that God imagines for God's people.

This king will not come from a priestly family.

This king will not be the eldest or fittest or strongest - in fact, he will be the youngest, the one who is overlooked by even his own family, not even invited to join them when Samuel first arrives and asks to see them all - although the author can't resist pointing out that David was healthy (ruddy), had beautiful eyes and was handsome (16:12).

God is not interested in the oldest, the strongest, the best, God is interested in the one who is open to where and how God is calling.

God is interested in the heart that is open to where and how God is calling.

Now, again, it doesn't take much to figure out that it never goes well if the current king knows that another person has been appointed to take his place - and you can read all about how that turns out in the rest of 1 Samuel - we skip over all those gory details.

In the coming weeks will focus instead on how David's reign turns out.

What is important for our thinking about God's kingdom, is that while God appoints David, and the Hebrew Scriptures largely hold David up as their greatest ever king, this was never God's intention for God's creation.

And so when Jesus comes, preaching and teaching about God's kingdom, he challenges all the kingdoms and empires of the day (the Roman Empire, the people of Israel who longed for the restoration of their own monarchy, as well as the Babylonians, Assyrians and others who waxed

and waned throughout history). As it challenges the kingdoms and empires still today - political empires that rule by violence and oppression, and the corporate empires that rule by wealth and the incessant demand for more.

God's kingdom is deliberately subversive, set against the kingdoms and empires that ruled then, and now.

And here in Mark's gospel, we learn that Jesus taught about God's kingdom in parables; in stories that offer more than one way of understanding, that are deeply rooted in the culture and assumptions of their time, that are explained to the disciples in private, and rarely captured in the written scriptures - so we are left to do some more hard work in attempting to unravel and understand their meaning.

The kingdom of God is like seed that grows - with or without our help, with or without the permission of the other "empires". God's word, God's way is scattered far and wide - and it will grow, it will generate, God's activity in the world will go on.

The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed - this one is even harder. Perhaps it is a joke - everyone knows the mustard seed is not the smallest seed and everyone knows the mustard tree is not the largest tree! But the seed is small-ish and it does grow into a robust bush that can even be somewhat invasive - "scrappy and ill-formed" was how one commentator described it¹ - and it does provide shelter for birds.

So perhaps we are being pointed to a kingdom, a way, a dream, that does not look like the others, again our expectations shift, to see a way that is not tall and majestic like the Cedars of Lebanon but wilder, less well-formed.

But even more than teaching about it, Jesus *embodies* God's kingdom, God's way, God's realm, God's dream. He gives sight to the blind, touches and heals those who have been excluded restoring them to their place in the community, he directly challenges the rules made by those in places of privilege, power and wealth and he sets free those who are oppressed. He makes friends with the people who are not cool - the tax collectors, the sex workers, the people that don't belong in the "respectable" ranks of society.

And he gives to us a tangible, timeless embodiment of this as we gather around this table. As we hold bread and juice, as we affirm together the One who draws us here, as we claim a unity, a oneness, that we know only too well is hard to live into, we catch a glimpse of this kin-dom, and we place our allegiance with, we make a commitment to, the way God has intended for the world. As flawed and as broken as we each are, together we affirm that God's way says that each one of us, and all of us together, are valued brothers and sisters in Christ, and we will work together to live out in our own lives and in the life of this community a way that is radically hospitable, inclusive and grace-filled.

So how will you speak of God's kingdom?
How will you embody God's kingdom?

Rev Kath Merrifield
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¹ By *The Well*, podcast for 13 June 2021, <https://bythewell.com.au/b125-pentecost-3-proper-6/>