

The Sermon and the Call of the Kingdom

Mark 1:14-20

“Jesus came preaching!” That is how Mark, just 14 verses into his gospel begins the public ministry of Jesus. So today I want to talk about “The Sermon” and “The Call of the Kingdom”. The heart of Jesus’ message and mission was what he called “The Kingdom of God,” In my own growing up Christian tradition, we scarcely heard about the kingdom of God. It was all about “eternal life” and getting into heaven. John was the main gospel we read with its emphasis on eternal life. We may have been thrown off a little because Matthew in his gospel out of his Jewish reverence for the name of God, called it “The Kingdom of heaven.”

So let’s look at the heart of Jesus’ preaching and the call of the kingdom, the “sermon” and the “summons”

I

Jesus’ sermon was in three parts. The first part was “The time is fulfilled”, the time is ripe. There are two kinds of time. The first is chronological time, tick-tock time. The Greek word is *chronos*. Then there is the kind of time when times seems almost to stand still so that it can hold what is happening. It is momentous

time, time of special significance and opportunity. The Greek word is *kairos*. Eternity drops down into time. Jesus was saying, right now, in our history and in our lives, the time is fulfilled, filled with God, filled with new life.

What have been such moments in your life? Times pregnant with possibility. A wedding, a new job, a momentous move to a new place, a new person who will change your life.

The time is fulfilled.

II

The second part of the sermon was: “The Kingdom of God has come near.” The kingdom of God is “at hand.” It is near, not far, and not just near but *here*, as close as your own breath, closer.

The phrase, “kingdom of God” has been variously translated. The Hebrew phrase behind it was the “royal reign of God.” I like calling it the Reign of God, not only because it softens the male/kingly imagery but also because it suggests that we live with God as the Lord and Center of our lives.

Some call it the “Realm of God.” Clarence Jordan was a Baptist New Testament scholar who left the classroom to found an inter-racial community in Georgia called Koinonia Farm. In segregated Georgia in the 60’s it was a radical experiment in Christian community. In his *Cotton Patch* translation of scripture

into Southern English he called it “God’s Movement”. John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg called it “God’s passion for earth”. On earth as in heaven!

The kingdom of God is justice, joy, compassion, healing and reconciliation. What is wrong is being set right, rectified, right-wised. Frederick Buechner described it this way:

The kingdom of God is the time, or a time beyond time, when it will no longer be humans in their lunacy who are in charge of the world but God his mercy who will be in charge of the world. It’s the time above all else for wild rejoicing—like getting out of jail, like being cured of cancer, like finally at long last, coming home. And it is at hand.¹

As Jesus talked about it he often used parables. It was a king’s feast where all are welcome, it is a seed growing secretly, it is a tiny mustard seed which will grow into a giant tree where birds come to nest and animals to rest. It is within us and among us, inside us and outside us. When you get a glimpse of it, it takes your breath away.

III

Part three of the sermon was “Repent and Believe.” The word “repent” may bring a sense of scalding shame, but it need not. It is not the sound of police

sirens with flashing light in your rear mirror as you drive. It is the sound of trumpets over the canyon at dawn. Life can begin again!

The Hebrew word behind it is *shuv*, to turn or return to God. To turn from death to life. When you discover you are on the wrong train, the first step is to get off at the next stop.

The Greek word for it is *metanoia*, literally, a change of mind. Marcus Borg says that it means, “to go beyond the mind you have.” There’s an A.A. slogan, maybe Buddhist too: “Don’t believe everything you think!” It is a turning from what blinds, harms, entraps. We get the courage to say to these things, “Watch me turn!”

Now to the word “believe.” It is more than a believing this or that, a doctrine, a certain set of beliefs. It is a believing *in*. It is something deeply relational. William Sloane Coffin writes: “*Credo*- I believe- best translates ‘I have given my heart to.’”

The religion scholar Karen Armstrong says that believing has to do with *trust, confidence, loyalty, and engagement*. Believing moves you into relationship with God and Christ.

And what we are believing in is good news, a great good news. The news of justice, joy, compassion, healing and reconciliation.

This kingdom is *not* good news to everyone, of course, at least not at first. It means giving up your own kingdom if your own kingdom is the opposite of justice, joy, compassion, healing and reconciliation. This kingdom has a vested interest in the kingdoms of this world which stand in opposition to the Reign of God.

But it is good news, Jesus says, to the poor—and poor in spirit—to the mourners and givers of mercy, to the peace makers and gentle ones of the earth.

This one verse, verse 14, captures the heart of the message of the one who “came preaching.”

IV

Now the call, the call of the kingdom. The next verses describe Mark’s version of the calling of the disciples. the first four, two sets of brothers, Andrew and Simon, and James and John. It happened while they were fishing.

First Jesus saw Andrew and his brother Simon casting their nets into the sea. Jesus said, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” Fishers of *people*. Rescuers of those who are drowning in the swirling deep waters of life. That’s part of who we are as followers of Jesus: those on the lookout for people who are drowning, drowning in sin and despair, drowning in addiction and

hopelessness, drowning in debts they believe can never be repaid. We keep watch over the waves, our nets in our hands, the net of God's love.

And "immediately" Mark says, using one of his favorite words, they dropped the nets and followed him. We tend to think that it was the first time they had met him or heard him. But maybe not. Perhaps they had seen and heard him preach about the kingdom and turning and believing. Perhaps word about him had spread to their town so when he showed up they already know who he was.

Then this happened. "Going a little farther", the text says, he saw James and John, sons of father Zebedee. They were in their boat mending nets. And "immediately" he called them to follow, and they left their nets and their father Zebedee in the boat. What did he think?! Had he heard of this man too? Did he shout after his sons: Go with my blessings! You were made for this!

V

The kingdom has a call. It comes not just once, but many times, in some ways daily. We can say no, but then later say yes. The call may mean one thing at one point in your life, then something different at another point of your life.

Frances Perkins had always been a fighter for workers rights. Then in 1911 she witnessed the horror of the Triangle Shirt Factory fire where employees,

mostly women leapt from windows to their deaths because the building had no fire escapes. One hundred and forty-six workers died. There was a heightened call in that fire. She went on to be F.D.R.'s Secretary of Labor, championing labor rights. She drafted the minimum wage legislation, and the Social Security Act of 1935. She was an architect of the New Deal. She served for 12 years, the longest of any cabinet member.

As we follow Jesus and become disciples, or learners, we discover more and more who he is and what that means for us.

Albert Schweitzer was a famous theologian, musician, organist and Bach scholar. He wrote a book which became a watershed book in the study of the historical Jesus: *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. After discussing more than a hundred years of Jesus scholarship he closed with this startling paragraph. I heard it first in a choral anthem, and it affects me still:

He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lakeside, he came to those men who knew him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me". And sets us to the tasks which he has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is. ²

Yes, we know about Jesus in many ways, but we know him best in the following of him.

Schweitzer would later give up his comfortable life in Europe. He would go to medical school and be sent by the Paris Missionary Society to Africa to found a hospital in Lambarene, along with his wife Helene, a nurse. His friends thought he was crazy. The famous organist Widor who loved him like a son asked him not to go. "I wanted to be a doctor that I might be able to work without having to talk", Schweitzer said. "For years I had been giving myself out in words." Now he would, in his words, be putting the "religion of love" into practice. ³

After he received the Nobel Peace Prize, someone said, "I'd like to be Albert Schweitzer as long as I could commute." We can't be followers of Jesus and commute. It will be giving the best and most of ourselves we can at this moment in our lives. And it will be putting Jesus' "religion of love" into practice. The kingdom of God is at hand.

1. Frederick Buechner, "*The Kingdom of God*", *The Clown in the Belfrey: Writings of Faith and Fiction* (San Francisco, Harper San Francisco, 1992), p. 165.

2. Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of It's Progress from Reimarus to Wrede* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1998, p. 402
3. Albert Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (N.Y.: Holt, 1933), pp. 114-5.