

Sunday 28th February – The Kingdom of God

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-46

Today we continue with our sermon series looking at what the life of the churches here in Shirley Parish could or should be like when we emerge from the Covid restrictions. Which things that we have learned and taken on board in this last year will we carry forwards? Which things from the past pre Covid days will we pick up again? Which things might be better for us to thank God for, but leave in the past?

Throughout Lent we will use our sermons on Sundays (with the exception of Mothering Sunday) to talk about aspects of what being a church is all about. Each sermon will end with a few questions for us to consider. We will talk about these in the zoom discussion groups on Wednesdays and Thursdays. Anyone without access to zoom is encouraged to talk over the phone with friends, and to give me a ring or drop me a line with their thoughts. It is possible of course that the sermon as written and published with the printed pewslip could change slightly by the time it is recorded and preached for the Sunday to enable it to reflect some of the thoughts and ideas that have come out of the discussions.

You will remember that last week we began by saying that our priorities as we move forwards should be

- encouraging more people to follow Jesus,
- helping those of us who already follow to follow him more closely
- and helping establish the Kingdom of God.

And we said too that our worship should embrace all three of these.

The church is sometimes criticised for being too inward looking – for only thinking about itself as an organisation and not worrying about the world beyond. It's worth noting that two of those priorities (encouraging people to follow Jesus and helping establish the Kingdom) are concerned with the world "outside the church", and the third one is really about helping us grow into the people God wants us to be so that we can achieve the other two priorities.

So today I want to think about what it might mean for us to help establish the Kingdom of God – we will then think about the other 2 priorities next week..

The Kingdom of God (or Kingdom of Heaven – they mean the same thing) is a phrase that is used a lot in the gospels. Jesus tells people they are not far from the Kingdom of God; he says the Kingdom of God is close at hand; he picks everyday things and says the Kingdom of God is like this – like a mustard seed, like treasure in a field, like someone sowing seed. So what does he mean when he uses this phrase, and what does he want us to do.

One common misapprehension is to think that Kingdom of God means the same as heaven, that it's to do with where we go when we die – perhaps this is because the phrase Kingdom of Heaven is sometimes used (particularly in Matthew's gospel) or maybe it's because we

know that God is in control in heaven. Jesus is quite clear though that it is to do with the here and now. “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”. The Kingdom of God is about God’s reign, God’s authority being extended from heaven to earth.

Another way of looking at it is that it is the ultimate reality – the way things were always intended to be. Someone once said “you don’t die into it, you awaken into it”. I think they meant that when we follow Jesus, when we accept him as our King if you like, we enter into the fullness of life that he spoke about. Perhaps a bit like moving from black and white to colour.

In the beginning God created a world that was perfect. Read the opening chapter of Genesis to hear the wonderful poetic account of the creation – “and God saw that it was very good.” But as we read on we see that things didn’t stay that way for long. People began to go their own way, ignoring God’s call on their lives. Soon the whole world was far away from the world God created. It was as if it were subject not to the authority or control of God, but some other power – “the world” we might call it. The Apostle Paul often uses the word “the flesh”. Some might call it the devil.

What Jesus is saying is that we need to get back to God being in control. We need to be subject to his ways and his authority. This is what the Kingdom of God is like – God back in control. It’s a Kingdom not about geography, but about who is “in charge”, who is “calling the shots” we might say.

To help us try to understand this let me take a risk and talk about Brexit. One of the straplines of the Brexit debate was that the UK should ‘take back control’. The situation (rightly or wrongly) was described as if the EU had wrested away sovereignty and control from the UK. We no longer lived under our own laws and guidelines but under those of a distant power. Leaving the EU would give us back control.

If our calling as Christians is to help establish the Kingdom of God, it is about putting God back in control – of all we are and all we do. It’s about showing people what lives with God in control look like. It’s really all about discipleship, about following Jesus because his life was the life that perfectly recognised the authority of God. So living lives that help establish the Kingdom effectively means living out lives that closely follow Jesus.

And we can pick out strands of what this means by looking at both Jesus’ example and his teaching. His example as shown by his spending time with those in need, by showing us how to serve by washing his disciples’ feet and by his challenging those who were in positions of power and wealth. His teaching by thinking of his command to love, his reinterpretation of the Old Testament laws (you have heard, but I say) and his parables of forgiveness and welcome.

When we talk about one of the priorities of the church being to help establish the Kingdom of God we are thinking about doing practical things to show God’s love and concern. This could be hands on things we could do here in Shirley – caring within our local community. It could also be to do with wider, perhaps global issues. But it could too move beyond the practical things to involve campaigning and lobbying to make the world a better place.

It doesn't take long to think of areas where things do fall short of God's ideal – locally, nationally and internationally. Poverty, war, refugees, loneliness, anxiety, prejudice, exploitation, pollution, climate change to name just a few. And when we list things like that we can get overwhelmed by the size of the problem and fail to see how anything we can do can make a difference with the small things we can do. But every little thing we can now do helps. You've probably heard the starfish story.

One day, an old man was walking along a beach that was littered with thousands of starfish that had been washed ashore by the high tide. As he walked he came upon a young girl who was eagerly throwing the starfish back into the ocean, one by one.

Puzzled, the man looked at the girl and asked what she was doing. Without looking up from her task, she simply replied, "I'm saving these starfish, Sir".

The old man chuckled aloud, "But, there are thousands of starfish and only one of you. What difference can you make?"

The girl picked up a starfish, gently tossed it into the water and turning to the man, said, "I made a difference to that one!"

So what can we do? Where should we put our efforts? These are the questions that we should be thinking about as we prepare to enter the post-Covid world.

Clearly our work with The Sparkhill Foodbank and the Narthex charity is important and will continue to be so. It helps provide food and other necessities to those who are caught in poverty. But should we not also be asking questions about why so many people are having to use foodbanks and why so many people just don't have enough to live on. And going beyond asking questions, to being part of whatever it takes to help bring about a society where foodbanks are no longer required. Addressing the symptoms of an issue is vital, but much better would be to address the root cause. This might not be a comfortable or easy thing to do. Dom Helder Camara – a Brazilian Catholic Archbishop - once said *When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.*

What other local issues are there that we can help with? Loneliness, isolation, anxiety are all things that have become more prevalent through the lockdowns. Are there ways in which we can offer practical help here? Hosting a place of welcome open to all to come to feel valued and appreciated, establishing the computer skills club that Kate Crocker has spoken about, maybe helping with something like the Family Support Centre at Shirley Baptist Church. Ways of showing God's love to the Shirley community by what we as Christians do.

When we look beyond the Parish we can, as we have thought already, be overwhelmed by the need. But perhaps we could concentrate on a few things that we can do rather than the many things we can't.

One thing would be to build on what we have done with the toilet twinning (the toilets in church house and St John's Church have all been twinned to fund toilets in the developing world). This could be extended to tap twinning or broader issues through organisations like Water Aid. Another area where we can build on what we have already started is in our care

for the environment. The churchyard at St James, the garden at St John's, our energy use and the switch to greener solutions.

And it's important to make the things we do become 'whole church' things rather than just the activities of small interest groups. Displays in the buildings, articles in the pewslip and magazine, a focus in sermons and intercessions could all help. And the practical action and fundraising is only part as we have said – there will also be some campaigning as we press for fairer and more just policies across the world.

Helping to establish the Kingdom of God is about the way we live – as churches but also as individuals - in the choices we make, the way we treat the environment and our attitude to others. And one last thought – at the beginning we recalled that one of the images Jesus used was the Kingdom of God being like a mustard seed. The mustard plant was like a weed – once sown it was hard to get rid of; it kept growing and spreading. Maybe when we start to live the kinds of lives that reflect Kingdom values we will see that it begins to spread. That others will see what we do and the kind of people we are and want to join in.

So once more, plenty to think about. I have deliberately started these sermons by thinking of the "world out there" to stop us falling into the trap of being too insular. How we live in the world is a reflection of what we believe and says something about who we really are.

So some questions for this week .

In what practical ways can the churches make a difference in the community of Shirley?

What questions should we be asking about the way our world is?

How can the churches (and we as individuals) respond to the climate change issue?

How do we make these things issues the whole church is involved in?