

The Kingdom of God

In the name of him who spoke the Word in parables, but to his disciples explained everything, dear friends in Christ: The kingdom of God is the subject of Jesus' teaching in this morning's Gospel. It would not have been a new concept to his hearers. The prophets had long foretold that the Lord would set up an everlasting kingdom that would be ruled over by a direct descendant of King David. It was this kingdom that Jesus' hearers longed for with eager anticipation. It was the sum of their hopes and dreams. The trouble is that they misunderstood what this kingdom would be like and how it would appear. They were thinking in terms of a kingdom like any other on earth, one with a king who lived in a royal palace; a kingdom with definable borders and that had a standing army that fought wars of conquest and subjected other nations, forcing them to pay tribute: *that* kind of kingdom.

But the kingdom of God that Jesus speaks of is not at all like the other kingdoms of earth. Though it is in this world, it is not of it. This is prophetically portrayed most vividly in the Book of Daniel. It's 600 years before the birth of Christ. King Nebuchadnezzar sits on the throne of Babylon, the mightiest empire on earth. One night the Lord God sends him a dream. In it the king sees a massive image in the form of a man. It towers above the earth. Its head is made of gold, its chest and arms are of silver, its lower torso of bronze, and its legs of iron. Its feet are a mixture of iron and clay. While the king marvels at this impressive image, he notices that a stone is being formed, but not with human hands. The stone suddenly accelerates as if hurled by a sling. It strikes the image at its feet causing the whole thing to come crashing down. It turns to dust that blows away in the wind. And then the stone, which was quite small at first, grows steadily into a mountain that fills the whole earth.

The king wakes in cold sweat, exceedingly disturbed by the dream. He calls for his wise men and magicians. He demands that they interpret the dream for him; but none can. At last up steps Daniel, a captive Hebrew serving in Nebuchadnezzar's court. The Lord has given him the key to understanding the dream. Daniel explains that the human image the king saw represents the successive empires of man. The head of gold is the Babylonian empire over which Nebuchadnezzar rules. And while Daniel doesn't name the empires that follow, we know now from history that the chest of silver is Medo-Persia, the midsection of bronze is Greece, and the legs of iron represent Rome. So, from top to bottom, this image is a timeline. It's also worth noting that the image is inherently unstable. The heaviest metals are the top, and the weakest point is the feet and ankles made of clay.

But again, understanding that the image is a timeline, we see that the stone strikes the image in the days of the Roman Empire. You know, like when Christ was born and lived his earthly life. It's in this era that the empires of man are done away with, and a new kingdom is founded. It starts with what seems to be insignificant: just a little stone. But it grows and becomes something huge. Like a mountain, it is immensely stable. It can't be moved. And it expands to fill the whole earth. This is the kingdom of God.

And this is the kingdom that Jesus is in the process of founding in today's Gospel. He founds his kingdom not by the strength of man or the might of his arms, but by his almighty Word. Indeed, the kingdom of God is present but unseen even as Jesus speaks. The kingdom is present because its king is present, present and instructing his subjects in the things of his

kingdom – which, as we heard, he does in three short parables; the latter two of which we heard.

The first, that for some reason the brilliant minds who created our lectionary cut out, is the Parable of the Sower. You remember that one. A guy goes out and sows his seed. Some falls on the beaten pathway where the birds eat it up. Some falls on rocky soil where it sprouts quickly but can't take the heat because its roots are shallow. It dies. Some falls among thorny weeds that crowd the plants and make them unproductive. And some falls on good soil where it grows to fruition.

Jesus explains that the seed is the Word of God. The various soils are those who hear. Some are hardened against the Word. They don't let it penetrate them. They resist the work of the Spirit. And Satan snatches away the Word that fell on them. Others like rocky soil receive the Word, but only superficially. They don't let it go deep into them, and when times of trial come, they turn away. Still others receive the Word, but worldly cares and concerns takes precedent in their lives. They don't produce any fruit for God's kingdom. And finally there are those who are the good soil where the Word takes root and multiplies 30, 60, or 100 fold.

The parable forces we, the hearers, to ask, "What kind of soil am I?" or, more importantly, "What kind of soil do I want to be?" We recognize in ourselves elements of all four soil types. In some areas we resist the Word and don't let it into our lives. We know what God says, we just don't want to hear it. In other issues we only take it in skin deep. Secret sins that we want to retain lie just beneath the surface preventing the Word from doing its work in us. And yes, we often let worldly cares supersede our faithfulness, making us unproductive. But, if we understand any of this, then there must be some good soil there too. And so the faithful Christian life becomes one of soil improvement, of breaking up the hard soil, digging out the hidden rocks, and pulling up the weeds so that God's Word will have free course in us to grow and produce in us the fruits of the Spirit like sacrificial love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and self-control.

Following hot on the heels of that parable are the two we heard today. One is called the Growing Seed. A man scatters seed in his field, and then he's pretty much done. He goes to bed and gets up day after day, and the seed germinates, grows, and produces fruit. Then he harvests. The parable shows the efficacy of God's Word; that is to say, the Word itself does all the work. After his earthly ministry is complete, Jesus will task his Apostles and those who follow them to go into all the world proclaiming his message of salvation. They are to cast the seed. But they don't make it grow. They can't. That's God's work. The trouble is that since the fall, we want to play God. And so pastors and churches become obsessed with statistics, and church growth trends, and stewardship programs, and methods to prevent so-called "back door losses" – fretting about such things as if we could control them. We can't. I can't make someone faithful and neither can you. All we can do is cast the seed of God's Word.

That being said, it's important that we do cast it. Faith comes by hearing the Word of God, and so upon the faithful and on those wandering from the faith and on those who are as yet unbelievers, the Word must be cast. That's our job. Whether it grows or not is God's business. Also, we can do our best to ensure the quality of the seed. Not everything being sold as Christian teaching is. Some of it is spiritual herbicide. It destroys faith rather than delivers it. So we want to make sure that the Word we speak is God's own; that we get it direct from Scripture and reliable sources and faithful teachers.

The other parable is the Mustard Seed. It starts this tiny, seemingly insignificant, little thing and grows into a great big plant – so big that the birds make their nests in it. This, you will recognize, as the New Testament version of Daniel’s little stone that grew into a mighty mountain that filled the earth. What’s the story here? It’s the Gospel story about how some two thousand years ago an obscure carpenter from a puny, no account nation, suddenly burst on the scene and began a short three year teaching and healing ministry, how he was opposed and rejected by the “religious experts” of his day, how he was put to death on a cross, and how he rose from the dead three days later. That’s it. That’s the mustard seed. It doesn’t look like much. But my, how it’s grown. Because in that little mustard seed is the power of God’s love for our salvation, the power to give life to people dead in sin now in time and to raise them up from the dead for eternity.

This, the kingdom of God, is the Holy Christian Church on earth. It’s a kingdom that can’t be seen. It has no borders or armed forces, and yet it includes citizens from every tribe and nation on earth. It’s a kingdom over which rules our one King, the Lord Jesus Christ, who gives life to us by the power of his holy Word, and who by the power of his Word is even now continuing to enlarge and extend his domain. May he make us faithful citizens who gladly do his will, producing the good fruit of the Spirit for which he made us, and using us to cast the seed that makes his kingdom grow. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!