

Keep On Growing: The Kingdom Life - 11th June 2023

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Preacher: Ian McKeown

[0 : 00] Morning everyone. It's good to see you. It's a lovely day it is as well, yeah. So we are continuing with our series this morning, Keep On Growing, and we're going to be looking this morning at what Jesus described as the greatest or the most important commandment.

So this is a mosaic of Christ Pantocrater, which literally means or translates as Christ Almighty or Christ Sustainer of the World. And it's from the Desis Mosaic in Hagia Sophia in Istanbul. Has anyone been to Hagia Sophia? Right, I'll come have a chat with you afterwards because I'm fascinated to go out and visit. It portrays Jesus when he returns to his kingdom. And I guess it's one of hundreds if not thousands obviously of depictions of Jesus. And I thought we would do something a little bit different this morning. I can see it. Oh, have I got to talk to people? No, no, no. I'd like to just get a little bit of participation from yourself, okay? Hopefully you're up for that. Just nod. Yay! Okay, nothing too difficult, I promise, okay? Just for a moment, just for a moment, I want you to imagine you are not, not a Christian, or at least you're not sure. So put yourself in someone else's shoes for a minute. And then in that role, I want to ask you a couple of questions, okay? And I'd like you to shout out what you think they might say. So here we go. And the first one, nice and easy, I'm just looking for one or two words, nothing more complicated, okay? Who is Jesus? A man, a human being, a prophet, saviour, okay? Yeah, some might say that. Almighty, a good man, a good man. He's in the Bible somewhere. That bit at the end. A religious bloke. A zealot.

Ooh, all right, okay, yeah, good one. Okay, you could have gone, I guess, holy man, good man, teacher, healer, preacher, all those sorts of things, all right. Okay, good. So here's the second one. Quick sentence, nothing complicated, just a quick couple of words, okay? What do you think people would say in that role to this? What was his message? Love, right, I think it's the first thing that would come into most people's heads, isn't it? Love. Help people. Peace, redeemer, kindness, he's kind. Compassionate, yeah, okay. Okay, I mean, we could probably go on, couldn't we, things that people might say. I actually think a lot of people would say they like Jesus. They're not so sure about the church, and they're maybe not so sure about some other Christians that they've met as well, unfortunately, which is a big shame, isn't it, you know? Unfortunately, you know, sometimes we get it wrong. Let me just play you a very short clip, then, of what some people have said, what some people's response to that question, who is Jesus, and what they've actually said.

[3 : 35] Here is the million-dollar question, okay? This is your opinion. Who is Jesus? See, now, see, now you want to start trouble.

It's a myth created by man in order to control society. I don't, I don't consider Jesus my savior or my spiritual leader. He is a spiritual leader, and one of the spiritual leaders I learned from.

Who is Jesus, in your opinion? Who was he? Who was he? Who was, he was a man. He was a man, okay. Absolutely. Your opinion. Jesus is my opinion. He is everything around here. He is spiritual, everything, earth, water, fire, everything.

Jesus is all that's good, all the things that are positive and affirmative in life. That's Jesus. I believe he is a higher power in the form of a man. Everyone else walking around, there's not another Jesus, there's just one. So, yeah, I believe he definitely did something.

Yeah, like on... Jesus is not a person. He's not a person, okay? Okay. So, do you believe he is a man or just, like, some higher power or... No, I don't believe in... Don't believe he even existed?

[4 : 50] No. Okay. No. Thank you. Jesus is our savior. Jesus is everything. He's the reason why we live. He's the reason why we get to do the things that we do in life. He's my heart and he's what I speak through my poetry, through my work, through my everyday life. That's Jesus.

I love that first guy's reaction, his answer to that. See, now you want to start some trouble. I think I just love that. Because it's something about, actually, this is more than just, you know, Jesus says, love each other and be kind, which, of course, he does. But, actually, there's a lot more there, isn't there?

Who Jesus is, what his message to those of us that would follow him means, is, of course, everything. You know, if we're followers of Jesus, it's everything to us. It's the heart of our faith and the relationship that we have with him. And whilst love, and particularly sacrificial love, is at the heart of his message, he also had quite a lot to say about justice and mercy. And his message, I think, had some pretty sharp edges to it. And particularly to those and for those that abused their position of authority and power. Have we got any C.S.

Lewis fans in the house? Yeah, okay. You like some of the books, seen the films. It's like the reply that Susan gets in the book, *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, if you've seen the film or you've read the book, when she asks about the lion, Aslan. She says, is he safe?

Who said anything about being safe? Says Mr. Beaver. Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king.

[6 : 46] Aslan is not a tame lion. He is not safe. All throughout the *Narnia Chronicles*, we encounter a being who is wild and on the loose. He's not to be tied down. He can't be controlled or manipulated.

And yet he is also utterly compassionate, forgiving and willing to sacrifice himself for, in the end, Edmund, who's taken a wrong turn. What of Jesus then? Is he safe?

Well, agape, sacrificial love, of course, as we said, is at the center stage for Jesus. Living out what it means to be fully human, fully present, to be real, to be vulnerable.

In all the struggles and the difficulties and the disappointments and all the laughter and the tears.

The gritty stuff. The real stuff. Okay. And so in one sense, following Jesus is very simple. Let's listen to what Jesus has to say when he's asked about the greatest commandment.

It's taken from Mark chapter 12, verses 28 to 34. One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, of all the commandments, which is the most important? The most important one, answered Jesus, is this.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God. The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this. Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.

[8 : 34] Yes. Well said, teacher, the Lord. The Lord is one. You are right in saying that God is one, and there is no other but Him. To love Him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God. And from then on, no one dared ask him any more questions.

Those sneaky scribes and priests, they've been trying to catch Jesus out in the last couple of chapters before we get to this one in the book of Mark. And Jesus has been very kind of deftly sidestepping them, I think, to get to the heart of what really, really matters.

And we sort of hear it there. There are no half measures here, are there? All our heart, soul, mind, and strength. It's the lot. Every aspect of human life poured out in worship.

And he doesn't stop there. He says, love your neighbor then as yourself. Not instead of ourselves, that's no good, but showing everyone the same respect and care that we show ourselves.

[9 : 59] I think it's interesting that the teacher there, or teacher of the law, is talking to Jesus. He draws something out. I don't know if you've picked up on it. But he draws something out that Jesus hadn't actually said aloud.

But of course, it's implied. See, if these commandments are the primary one, then all that stuff about the temple and the sacrifices, and what that stands for, all that's redundant.

A bit like the burnt offering that came off my barbecue the other day. It doesn't mean anything. You know, it's like, well, you just did yourself out of a job, didn't you?

And it's not going to play out well. It's not going to play out well. Jesus is both affirming and fulfilling the commandment that's in Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 to 9.

Because the kingdom that he's ushering in brings this commandment within their and our reach. Let me just read to you from Deuteronomy.

[11:03] Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts.

Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you're at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

Write them on your door frames of your houses and on your gates. That's pretty comprehensive, isn't it? And as you probably know, Orthodox Jews wear a physical reminder of that strapped to their forehead during prayer.

It's a small, usually black wooden box with Torah commandments inside. And it's called a tefillin. You may have seen one. The passage that's become a prayer is known as the shema.

And it means to hear, or more accurately, to listen and then follow and to be open, to be shaped by God. And traditionally, the prayer is recited twice a day with a hand placed over the eyes.

[12:22] Not because the shema demands blind obedience, okay, but because it shields those that are praying from all of the distractions that are around them.

So that they can listen attentively, focusing their devotion on the oneness and the unity of God's creation as they join together in worship. It's one of the most important traditions that devout Jews practice.

And of course, tradition can be a very powerful thing. I've shared this before, but I will share it again. There is a story that in 1945, two rabbis from the United States were sent as chaplains to liberate some of the concentration camps in Europe.

And whilst they were there, they were told that there were Jewish children that were being cared for in the monastery, or in a monastery in the south of France. So they traveled there, and they approached the priest, and they said that they had come to collect the Jewish children.

Well, the priest responded by saying that unless they had got documentation identifying which children are actually Jewish, then they weren't able to hand any children over to them.

[13:41] So one of the rabbis thought for a moment, and then he came up with an ingenious idea. You know what, he said, we'll come back tonight, and when you're about to put the children to bed.

So later that night, the rabbis returned, and they went into the dormitory, and there were these small beds with children, some of whom had been there since 1939, separated from their families, all alone in the world.

And as the children were going to sleep, the rabbis walked up and down the aisles in the dorms, and in a loud voice, they cried out, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

And as they said that, child after child began to lift their hands to cover their eyes. And every child who lifted their hands to cover their eyes, the rabbis cried out, That child is one of ours.

That child is coming home with us. Now, I know it might not be a good safeguarding story, but it's a powerful story of what it means to belong, to be loved, to be accepted, and also what it means to be part of something that is much bigger than us.

[15:17] And it points, I think, to something that Jesus kept coming back to time and time and time again. His overarching message, the kingdom of God is at hand.

If Jesus was just going around telling people to be a bit more loving and caring towards one another, and to forgive their enemies, and to turn the other cheek, and be a good neighbour, be maybe a bit more generous with their money, it's difficult, isn't it, to see who gets really offended by that.

You know, probably some people. But it doesn't really get you into hot water with the Jewish and the Roman authorities. It's sort of kind of like, well, you know, he's sort of just another do-gooder. So the message must have been much, much more challenging, more shocking and subversive to those in power. It's a message of hope and restoration to those who knew what it meant to be oppressed and to be put down.

And it's a message of rebuke to those in authority and power who were supposed to, in humility, Matt was talking about last week, help others to draw closer to God's kingdom.

[16:47] The words of the prophet Micah, to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with God. And that's a warning to those that might manipulate the system to get what they want.

If we head back for a moment, just to the beginning of Mark's gospel, we see the beginning of this kingdom message and ministry.

It's in Mark chapter 1, right at the beginning, in verses 14 and 15. I'll just read that to you. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God.

The time has come, he said, the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news. I think Jesus picked his moment really carefully, waiting until after John was taken. Something or someone is knocking at the door. It's not something out there in the dim and distant future, but right now, right here, in your very midst. So wake up, turn around, embrace what's coming.

[18:00] I don't think it's a coincidence that John was located in one place by the Jordan River as he was baptizing people. But here is Jesus, straight away, on the move.

A wandering prophet, a wandering priest. Because God is on the move. He's coming into his kingdom, and it requires a response.

And Jesus is about to upset the apple cart, so watch out. For those listening to him, the kingdom of God had a very specific meaning.

God's rule on earth. Setting the captives free. Bringing restoration and redemption to Judah. Peace for the nation. Justice and victory over their oppressors.

Gathering together the scattered exiles and restoring their fortunes. Jesus. And so Jesus stands up and says, The kingdom of God is at hand.

[19:03] The kingdom of God, both a present reality and a future hope. Already at work in the world as we live out the message, turning away from everything that would separate us from God, and letting go sometimes, sometimes bit by bit, if we're honest, of our old selves.

Okay? And embracing the new. But also a kingdom not yet fully realized. Not until the king comes back. It's dangerous talk.

This upside down kingdom. Shake in the status quo. It'll get you into trouble. I think it's interesting that when Jesus is asked, What's the kingdom of God like?

He says things like this. Well, it's like a grain of mustard seed. It looks small and insignificant. Matt was talking about that, wasn't he, last week. Or it's like this treasure hidden in a field. Or it's like a merchant who finds a pearl of great value. Or it's like a woman that mixes yeast into the dough.

[20:15] Or a father who has two sons, and one of them goes off and squanders all his inheritance. Or a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire people.

Jesus never really gives a straight answer, does he? And I think that's because the kingdom of God is not supposed to be easy to understand.

It's not supposed to be obvious. I think it's supposed to be intriguing. It's something that we have to grapple with.

You know, to allow it to sink in and challenge us. Maybe in some way it kind of wants to seize hold of our imaginations and entice us into letting go of all the things that we thought were important. To change our priorities. To change us. So that we might be able to imagine a completely different way of seeing the world and seeing ourselves and how we're connected to one another.

[21:26] And I guess that takes time. It's the journey we're on as we keep on growing. Jesus didn't come to start a new religion called Christianity.

Christianity. He came to be a living example of what God's kingdom of hope and love and humility and compassion and forgiveness and healing looks like.

And to challenge us to be willing to step into that kingdom and go on a journey that changes not just our lives but those around us.

And there are no promises it will be safe or easy. But it will be good. And filled with the spirit we are given the strength and guidance to do that.

For me there is something about knowing that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. It's why us being in fellowship with each other at St. John's is so, so important.

[22:37] And let's face it, there is so much good stuff. There is so much good stuff that's going on in and around St. John's in the local area. And that is so encouraging.

There are so many people putting their hand up and saying, yeah, I want to get involved. Moving forward with God. And I'm sure, if you haven't been to see it yet, I'm sure the new kitchen will play an important part in that.

In the future. What it unlabeled us to do. And for sure, God's got lots more in store for us. More challenges, more opportunities. As we get drawn deeper and deeper into this kingdom life.

But also, for some of us, maybe this morning there's something just gently prompting you about your priorities.

What really, what really, really matters to you. Maybe there's a bit of reordering that needs some attention. And I know, I know that.

[23 : 46] Because I feel it too. I know that that might not be an easy thing. But it's just niggling away. And you know that it's something that needs a decision.

Don't ignore that. Or maybe there's someone you're really struggling with. And loving your neighbour seems a long, long way off.

Maybe it's even someone in your family. How do you think God sees them? I think sometimes it seems sort of beyond us to find a way through that.

Just listen to what C.S. Lewis had to say. I pray because I can't help myself. I pray because I'm helpless.

I pray because the need flows out of me all the time. Waking and sleeping. It doesn't change God.

[24 : 54] It changes me. Or maybe you just need to hear some words of encouragement this morning.

You know, nothing goes unnoticed. And sometimes it's the smallest things that mean the most. So keep on going.

Be encouraged. Keep on growing. Because we move forward together. It's like the Apostle Paul says in Ephesians.

There is only one body. One spirit. One hope. One Lord. One faith.

One baptism. And one God. And Father overall. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[25 : 54] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.