

The Meaning of the Kingdom

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone, great to see you this morning and let me just say thank you for those who are currently in the process of doing translation work for me and throughout this service but also the enormous amount of work that happens in the background for translation work so that we are prepared Sunday by Sunday.

I'm reticent to say it but it was astounding to sing that Mandarin song. It in fact brought tears to my eyes for something that was a great song, theologically really strong and expressing a real heart worship of God and yet it didn't originate from an Anglo person.

I think that is fantastic for us as a church, for those of us who are kind of used to dominating from the Anglo culture side of things to hear from brothers and sisters from other parts of the world who are different from us.

It was referred to as a day that changed the world forever. Tuesday 11th September 2001, there was a series of four coordinated suicide attacks by Al-Qaeda upon the United States.

We know the outcome of it, 3,000 victims, 19 hijackers died on the attacks and it is infamously remembered today as the worst terrorist atrocity in human history.

[1 : 32] The overwhelming majority of the casualties were civilians including nationals from 70 different countries. And most of us can remember where we were in that moment when we heard that awful news when it reached us for the first time.

I remember the moment vividly. I was rousing from sleep and my alarm clock had gone off and it was the news and all I caught in my half awake was the Twin Towers have collapsed.

And I remember thinking, that's not right. I must have misheard that. That's not possible. And it was. Many things changed in the world on that day.

One thing that particularly changed was it saw the rise in the West of the new atheism movement. A rejection of God. And many things changed on the day that Jesus arrived over 2,000 years ago.

[2 : 41] It's the very first sentence of Mark as we looked at last week. That the God who started history broke into history and everything changed.

Mark begins with the beginning of the good news about Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God. His style communicates, as I said last week, a sense of crisis. The status quo has now been ruptured. Mark wants us to see that this Jesus, as he did then, does now still calls for decisive action in our lives.

And that decisive action is in the very first words that he speaks. Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel. Repent and believe the good news.

That's what he calls from us. And the good news is another way of saying gospel, which literally means news that brings joy.

[3 : 40] And at the time of Mark, that word was used. It meant history-making, life-altering, shaping news.

And that's what Christianity is. It's life-altering news. History-altering news. And the history-altering news of Christianity is that Jesus has come to bring us back to our maker, our creator, our God.

He calls us to stop living lives as if we are the king of our lives. And to come to him and to have our lives orbit around him. Now, what we notice in the text today is that as soon as Jesus speaks about the kingdom of God, he calls and he calls people to repent and believe.

He immediately starts choosing people to follow him. Initially, there's this core group of 12 and a bunch of other followers.

And Mark records the first of these encounters from verse 16. So come with me in the text. As Jesus walked beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the lake.

[4 : 56] For they were fishermen. Come, follow me, Jesus said. And I will send you out to fish for people. Now, what Jesus is doing here is somewhat unique in Jewish tradition.

In Jewish tradition, pupils used to choose their rabbis, not rabbis, their pupils. And Mark is showing us that Jesus has a very different type of authority than your regular rabbi.

You can't have a relationship with Jesus unless he calls you to himself. And there are two encounters here that are slightly different encounters.

When he calls Simon and Andrew to follow him in verse 17, they leave their fishing nets and they follow him.

That is, they leave their vocation and they follow him. Their livelihood and they follow him. When he calls James and John, they leave their father behind in the boat.

[6 : 23] That's the emphasis in that verse. They leave their father behind in the boat. These men, all of them who were called by Jesus in this moment, they did fish again and they did relate to their parents again.

You can see that in the rest of Mark. But what Jesus is saying here in this first calling of these disciples is drastic. People with a heritage in traditional culture, like generally from Eastern societies, they get their identity from their family.

And so when Jesus says, I want priority over your family, leave your father behind, he's saying something pretty drastic in that moment for those in those traditions.

On the other hand, in an individualistic culture like the West, saying goodbye to your parents is not as big a deal. But for Jesus to say, I want priority over your career, your vocation, that's drastic.

And Jesus is saying here that knowing him, loving him, resembling him, serving him, must become the supreme passion of your life.

[7 : 43] Everything else comes second. Everything else comes second. Now one of the things that changed in the Western world as a result of September 11, and apart from the rise of new atheism, was the fear of fanaticism, especially any kind of religious fanaticism.

There was a fear of Islamic fanaticism prior to September 11, but it expanded to even Christian fanaticism in a growing secular culture.

And there's good reason for that fear. Considerable violence is being carried out in this world by highly religious people.

And even when you set aside that kind of religious fanaticism, we aren't short of examples of people who are very religious, and yet at the same time, they are condemning, they are self-righteous, and they are abusive.

All the sort of things that we seek to work hard against here at St. Paul's. And so most people, particularly in the Western world, would see religion as a spectrum of belief.

[9 : 08] On one end, are people who say they are religious, but they don't really believe or live out the fundamentals of whatever it is, the religion that they say they believe.

On the other end of the spectrum, are the fanatics. These are the people who are too religious. The people who kind of over-believe everything and over-live their faith.

So you've got hypocrites at one end, and you've got fanatics at the other end. And many people think that the solution to the hypocrites and the fanatics is to meet in the middle.

Moderation in all things. Moderation in everything. We can sit comfortably with moderation. Sort of. And clearly, Jesus hasn't heard about that option.

In Luke 14, he says to a large crowd gathered, in verses 26 and 27, Luke 14, if anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, such a person cannot be my disciple.

[10 : 28] And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Now that doesn't sound moderate at all.

Jesus says, if anyone comes to me, he doesn't say, all right, all right, look, consensus here, some of you can be moderate.

Some of you can be moderate as my disciples, but I really do need a few good men and a few good women who are prepared to go all the way with this discipleship thing. I need the rah-rah of the Marines or so.

I need a few of those. The rest of you can be moderate. He says, anyone, anyone, no double standards here, no double standards at all.

If anyone wants to have anything to do with Jesus, you have to hate your father and your mother, your wife and your child, your brother and sister, even your own life. He says, otherwise you cannot be my disciple. That's what it means to follow Jesus.

[11 : 31] Now, that does seem a little bit contradictory to Jesus because a little bit later on, he says, you can't even hate your enemy.

So what's he doing here? Telling you you hate your family, but don't hate your enemy. What's his problem with family? Until you realize that Jesus isn't actually calling us to hate actively, but he's actually calling us to hate comparatively.

He's calling his disciples to follow him so fully, so intensely, so comprehensively, so enduringly, that every other entachment in life looks like hate in comparison.

You see, when we say to Jesus, I'll obey you, Jesus, if and when my career thrives, or I'll obey you, Jesus, if and when my health is sorted out, or if and when, you know, I raise the kids, or I've paid off the house, then the thing that's on the other side of that if and when, that's your real master.

That's your real God. That's your real Lord. It is your functional king. It is the goal of your life.

Anything that puts Jesus to one side, and when I achieve this, Jesus, then I'll do that, then I'll follow you.

[13 : 01] That is your real master. That is your real Lord. And Jesus says, I will not be a means to an end. I will not be used.

When he calls us to follow him, he alone must be the goal. Now that sounds like fanaticism. And it is, if you don't understand the difference between religion and the Christian gospel.

Religion, as I said last week, is advice on how you must live life to earn your way to God. And the job of the adherent to religion is to follow the advice to the best of their ability.

And if you do, you do follow it faithfully and completely, you'll believe that you will have a connection with that God. You'll feel a connection with that God because of how you lived and how you believed.

And this inevitably leads to a feeling of superiority over other people who have different living standards and different belief.

[14 : 21] And once you have that position of pride, it is a slippery slope. When we feel superior to people, we tend to distance ourselves from people and when we distance ourselves from people, we start to exclude them, we start to hate them and we start to ultimately oppress them.

And there are some Christians and there are some Christian groups who are just like that. But it's not because they've gone too far with Jesus.

It's not because they're too committed to Jesus. It's because they haven't gone far enough with Jesus. It's because they haven't gone all the way with Jesus. They aren't as fanatically humble and sensitive or as fanatically understanding and generous as Jesus is.

They are treating Christianity as if it was advice instead of news. You see, the good news, the Christian gospel is not advice.

It is good news that you don't need to earn your way to God because Jesus has done it for you. It's a gift that we receive because of the sheer, may I say, astounding grace of God.

[15 : 46] That's what it is. It's the astounding grace of God as we just sang. And when we grab hold of that gift and continue to do so, then the call of Jesus in our lives, it won't lead to fanaticism, it won't lead to moderation and it won't lead to hypocrisy.

The gospel leads us to passionately make Jesus our goal and our priority. It leads us to the point of humility and service of him and humility and service towards every other person.

Our lives revolve around Jesus. Jesus doesn't revolve around our life. The gospel impact on our lives means that when we meet somebody with a different set of priorities, a different faith, we won't assume that they are inferior and deserving of our persecution, oppression and condemnation.

Instead of oppressing them, we serve them. That's the difference the good news makes.

Christianity is about being called to follow the king.

It's not about choosing to follow advice. It's not about someone with the power and authority to tell you what needs to be done.

[17 : 13] It's about someone with the power and authority doing what needs to be done and then offering it to us as good news. And Jesus has that authority.

As we saw last week at Jesus' baptism, there was a display of supernatural signs which announced his divine authority. And Jesus calls on the lives of Simon, Andrew, James and John.

When he calls their life, he has authority to call them. They followed him without delay. We see that Jesus has authority over all of life.

Mark uses the word authority for the first time in verses 22 to 23. They went to Capernaum and when the Sabbath came, Jesus went into the synagogue and began to teach. The people were amazed at his teaching because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.

Now the word authority means out of the original stuff. The word stuff is my, you know, version in there.

[18 : 23] Out of the original stuff. It has the same origin as the word author, the author of life, the maker of life, the one who made all stuff.

And Mark means that Jesus taught about life with original authority. Jesus didn't simply clarify something that someone else had already said or knew about. He didn't simply interpret the Bible in a way that the Jewish authorities hadn't interpreted the Bible.

It's like he was the original source. It's like they sensed with Jesus that he was explaining the story of their lives as if he was the one who wrote the story.

And they were amazed by it. Because he is the author of life. He's the king of life.

You read on and we see that Jesus' authority extends even further. Verse 23 to 27. It just takes his authority to the next level. We have the voice of the Father confirming the identity of Jesus at his baptism.

[19 : 40] He is his much loved son. And now we have a different voice. And anybody who hates Jesus in verse 26 likewise confirms the identity of Jesus.

What do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God. evil spirits who love darkness recoil from light.

And it's very possible to recognize Jesus for who he is and yet hate him even the more, which is what we see here. This man wanted nothing to do with Jesus.

The demon shriek was full of malevolent aggression. His opening burst, what do you want with us Jesus of Nazareth? was a common Old Testament formula which is roughly equivalent to you have no business with us yet.

Evil spirits wanted to say to Jesus, go away, the time has not yet come, go away. And the next phrase which is stated as a question, have you come to destroy us, is actually, in actual fact, a defiant assertion.

[20 : 59] You have come to destroy us. You see, this demon realized the menace of Christ and cried out with an instinctive expression of dread.

He wanted Jesus to disappear for he knew that Jesus would in fact destroy him. But note what he does in verse 24, it's his final cry out.

This is dramatic. I know who you are, the Holy One of God. Now on one level, that appears to be a submissive acknowledgement of who Jesus is, but it's in fact a frantic attempt to bring the Lord Jesus under his power.

power. We know that because the idea was widespread at the time that the exact knowledge of the other's name brought mastery and control over them.

And that is what this evil spirit is attempting to do. It's an ill-informed attempt to control Jesus just as Satan had attempted to do in the wilderness just before this.

[22 : 15] And Jesus, rather than submits to the evil spirit, demands that the man be quiet, literally be muzzled, and the unclean spirit come out of him.

The evil spirit was powerful enough to control this man, but not Jesus. And he did just what Jesus told him to do in that instant. Jesus spoke and this evil spirit obeyed.

See, Jesus is king over the spiritual realm. He has an unmatched authority. People were starting to notice it. Wherever Jesus went, people were amazed at his teaching and his actions.

Even the evil spirits obey him. Wherever he went, crowds were forming. Fuss was being made about Jesus. And so why did Jesus tell this evil spirit, be quiet?

And down in verse 34, it says, he also drove out many demons, but he would not let the demons speak because they knew who he was.

[23 : 23] Why do that? Why tell them to be quiet? Is it just an effort to, you know, divine crowd control?

Why doesn't he take advantage of his incredible popularity? Why not generate more appeal to who he is and his message? That's what I would have done.

You know, challenge me evil spirit, get out, evil spirit goes, you know, who's your daddy? I'd be high-fiving and chest-pumping with the disciples. Till everyone thieves in town.

That's what I'd do. Not Jesus. And the key is in verse 26. The impure spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

There's one other place in Mark's gospel where that sentence is almost exactly reproduced. It's in Mark 15 verse 37 and it describes the death of Jesus with a loud cry.

[24 : 42] Jesus breathed his last. Literally, his spirit was expelled. What Jesus knew was that the only way that he would ever silence the demons was to allow himself to be silenced.

The way to wield his true authority was not to parade it around and brandish it but simply to give it up.

To give it up. No convulsing, no struggling, no thrashing but simply to give it up.

To steal the spirits he would have to give up his own. His wasn't involuntarily driven out, it was voluntarily given up and everything in this passage that we see is but a skirmish to prepare for the last and great battle that Jesus was to win, to utterly destroy the power of sin and death by taking the death and the sin that is ours and upon himself.

Jesus himself does everything that he calls us to do and so when he calls James and John to leave their father in the boat, he's already left his father's side and his father will turn his back on him later.

[26 : 22] Charles Wesley captured that thought well in the hymn and can it be, he left his father's throne above so free, so infinite his grace. Later in this gospel he's going to be ripped from his father's presence on the cross.

You see, his kingship is a kingship over sickness, sin, death, oppression. His kingship is not a fanatic.

He doesn't wield his authority as a fanatic who seeks to condemn and oppress. He doesn't wield his authority in a totalitarian way. Jesus Christ's kingship is not designed to crush.

It is the ultimate authority and it's not designed to crush or oppress. His authority is wielded to serve and to restore.

take a look at verses 30 and 31 with me. Simon's mother-in-law was in bed with a fever and they immediately told Jesus about her.

[27 : 36] And so he went to her, took her hand, he helped her up and the fever left her and she began to wait on them. She was sick with a fever and Jesus came to her still and touched her still and then it says he helped her up.

He literally raised her and everywhere in Mark's gospel when someone is healed, the exact same word is used everywhere, right through it, every encounter, raised.

And it's the exact same word which is used to describe the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, when Jesus demonstrates his authority, healing the sick, freeing the captives, casting out demons, it resurrects, it restores, it brings to life.

His authority isn't oppressive, it doesn't subjugate, it doesn't crush, it literally breathes new life, a new spirit into.

His is expelled and he breathes new life into, to heal, to restore, to set free. And when we understand the good news and submit to the authority, that's what it does.

[29 : 06] His authority sets you free. It raises you. sets you free to serve as we have been served by God.

Fanatical serving of God and of others. Notice what Simon's mother-in-law does. The fever left her and she began to wait on them.

Now, the skeptical amongst us might say, well, Jesus did that because he was hungry and he needed someone to cook the meal. Okay. She began to serve them.

She wasn't healed. Notice what doesn't say that. She wasn't healed, she wasn't raised and then went about her own business. She got up and she served. She gave herself to others.

She didn't get raised and then go, ah, all those things that I wanted to do while I was sick and potentially dying.

[30 : 12] I didn't my bucket list, I better get on and do it. She gave herself to others. See, when we grasp the good news and we submit to the authority of Jesus and have our lives orbit around Jesus, it sets us free from all other selfish authorities that crush us and enslave us.

you see, Jesus' authority gives us a new set of priorities, a new life of service, a life of hospitality, a life of generosity, a life of community building, a life of meeting the needs of others, a life of fanatical humility and grace.

That's what it does. and every act of uttered, done in the name of Christianity that is opposite to that is not Christianity, has nothing to do with Jesus and it's not done in the name of Jesus at all.

A life of fanatical humility and grace, everything that God created and intended for us to be and do, not because we've got something to pay back or because the authority is enslaving, we do it simply because like Simon's mother-in-law, we have been raised and we now can.

We now can.